



Johann P. Arnason / Peter Murphy (ed.)

*AGON,  
LOGOS,  
POLIS*

The Greek Achievement  
and its Aftermath



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## Contents

Acknowledgements .....	6
Introduction .....	7
<i>Oswyn Murray</i> : Gnosis and Tradition .....	15
<i>Louis A. Ruprecht</i> : Why the Greeks? .....	29
<i>Christian Meier</i> : The Greeks: The Political Revolution in World History ....	56
<i>Kurt A. Raaflaub</i> : Political Thought, Civic Responsibility, and the Greek Polis .....	72
<i>Jean-Pierre Vernant</i> : Forms of Belief and Rationality in Greece .....	118
<i>Pierre Vidal-Naquet</i> : Beasts, Humans and Gods: The Greek View .....	127
<i>Cornelius Castoriadis</i> : Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self- Creation of <i>Anthropos</i> .....	138
<i>Johann P. Arnason</i> : Autonomy and Axiality: Comparative Perspectives on the Greek Breakthrough .....	155
<i>Peter Murphy</i> : Architectonics .....	207
<i>Vassilis Lambropoulos</i> : On the Notion of the Tragedy of Culture .....	233
Notes on Contributors .....	256

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## Introduction

Johann P. Arnason and Peter Murphy

### I

The persistence of interest in the Greeks is a salient feature of contemporary thought. At its most elementary, the Greek connection may not go beyond the scope of ideological strategy. In the last two decades, conflicting accounts of the Greek achievement have thus served to stake out positions in the North American "culture wars"; Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987) are the obvious cases in point. But the alternatives of traditionalist reaffirmation and radical debunking, exemplified by these two books, do not exhaust the field. Various recent works have brought Greek perspectives to bear on modern problems in more innovative and exploratory ways. In *Republics Ancient and Modern* (1992), Paul Rahe forcefully restates the classic contrast between ancient and modern paradigms of liberty, while I.F. Stone's *The Trial of Socrates* (1988) rehearses the issues of freedom of speech and civil liberty against the backdrop of Socrates' trial. Paul Cartledge's *The Greeks* (1993) similarly addressed contemporary questions (men vs. women, freeperson vs. slave, citizen vs. alien) through the mirror of the Greek *polis*. Peter Euben and his colleagues, in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (1994), move much closer to the Greek side and press the case for the relevance of the ancient *polis* to the remaking of contemporary American democracy. In a different context, Martha Nussbaum (*The Therapy of Desire*, 1994) presented ancient (stoic) psychology as a tonic for the distresses of moderns while the final two volumes of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1985) explored Greek sexual ethics as an alternative to both Christian and modern moralities.

From a more long-term point of view, decisive turns and formative trends in twentieth-century thought have been linked to reinterpretations or rediscoveries of Greek sources. The variety of approaches to this omnipresent legacy does not exclude subliminal connections between them; both aspects are perhaps best illustrated by the seminal works of Heidegger and his student Hannah Arendt. Arendt's reactivation of the Greek political imaginary is as inconceivable without the Heideggerian background as it is incompatible with Heidegger's own way of recovering Greek origins. In their ambidextrous work, both Presocratic visions of being and *polis*-centred understandings of action became durable themes of modern philosophical discourse. Other Greek horizons were opened up by thinkers drawing on very different traditions. Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* – arguably the single most important book on ethics written during the last quarter of the

20th century (and one by an author who brought together Christian, Marxist and analytical backgrounds) – made a powerful case for the Aristotelian mode of moral inquiry and gave a lucid but less conclusive account of the modern predicament. Perhaps the most sustained and at the same time original reappropriation of Greek traditions in modern thought is to be found in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. His efforts to rethink political philosophy and social theory drew on Aristotle's synthesis of the Greek experience, as well as on the much more elusive legacy of a "Greek Enlightenment" which he saw as the intellectual counterpart to Athenian democracy, and on a new understanding of the imaginary significations that were already central to Greek culture before its reflexive turn.

This widespread and many-sided receptivity to Greek ideas is symptomatic of modern concerns, but the results would not be what they are without the very genuine and specific clues provided by the Greek tradition. Some key aspects of this inheritance may be briefly noted. At a time when a particular problematic of reason (reason looked at in terms of its "divisions" and its "others") has increasingly come to the fore, the unity in diversity exemplified by Greek reason – ranging from myth, epic and tragedy to history, philosophy and science – appears as a singularly impressive precedent, even if it cannot be canonized as a model. Greek ways of bridging the gap between the ethical and political domains of practical reason are a prime case of this "coherence of the non-identical" (to use a term coined by Adorno for other purposes), irresistibly attractive to modern thinkers in search of antidotes to post-modern fragmentation but unamenable to a direct re-enactment of Enlightenment reason. From another angle, it is the rationality of form-giving that makes the Greeks stand out in contrast to the modern loss of balance between form and content. The distinctively Greek affinity of concept and *Gestalt*, emphasized by Wolfgang Iser and other authors, continues to intrigue and challenge interpreters coming from a very different world. A further characteristic feature, highlighted by many otherwise different reconstructions of Greek thought, is the agonistic mode of reasoning and discourse: the construction of polarities is as central to Greek cosmological models as it is to the interpretive structuring of the social world and to the adversarial forms of public debate. This underlying pattern of articulation is a favourite theme of those who stress the continuity between myth and philosophy, but it also serves to link the Greek legacy to problems and perspectives of modern thought. The interplay of opposites in multiple domains of life and thought is rediscovered by modern critics of identitarian logic.

## II

As these introductory comments suggest, any reconsideration of the Greek experience and its lessons for later cultures must begin with a demarcation of aims and interests within a very disputed field. The present collection should be seen as a joint effort of classical scholars and social theorists; it grew out of a conference organized in 1997 by the journal *Thesis Eleven* and scholars in Modern Greek and

Hellenic Studies at Ohio State University. The authors come from different backgrounds and pursue different projects, but they share some basic assumptions about the matter at issue. In particular, they take the view that the main task is to strive for more adequate understanding of the Greek combination of uniqueness and universality, rather than to deconstruct a supposedly central element of Eurocentrism.

To insist on the specificity of the Greek experience is not to imply that we can resurrect or redefine the idea of a Greek model. Rather, the very notion of a model is doubly misleading. On the one hand, the Greek achievement depended on an unprecedented, unparalleled and unrepeatable constellation; comparative analysis is essential to our grasp of this context, but it should serve to underline the exceptional features of the trajectory which began with the emergence of the Archaic Greek *polis*. On the other hand, the institutional and cultural inventions of the Archaic and Classical periods had more to do with the opening of new horizons than with the construction of definitive models. A cluster of interrelated radical innovations pointed beyond the existing social framework (in that sense, the Parsonian notion of a "seedbed society" is apposite) and lent themselves to more or less selective appropriation by later cultures; but some of the historical creations involved were more easily transferable, adaptable or translatable than others, and the outcomes depended on the transformative and interpretive potential of the recipients. The tension between context and creation was accentuated by the interpretive responses of various heirs to the Greek legacy. Growing historical distance from the Greeks made it difficult to grasp how different their lifeworld had been from those of contemporaries and successors; levelling and (more precisely) over-modernizing interpretations have therefore been a tempting expedient to analysts of the Greek world; this trend has, in turn, provoked defamiliarizing countercurrents among the more critical modern schools of thought, but their revised images of the Greeks have also been used to justify downgrading or rejection of the durable Greek presence in European culture. At the same time, the disconnection from historical origins made the Greek sources more open to creative adaptations that often focused on specific aspects while disregarding others. Retrospective classicisms in general and modernist classicisms in particular are thus part and parcel of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Greek traditions.

The most important common theme of the papers in this collection is the centrality of politics to both sides of the picture: the peculiarities of the Greek condition as well as the universal implications of the Greek achievement. In that sense, Christian Meier's reference to a "political revolution of world history" sums up the problematic of the whole book. A local deviation from the mainstream of political life and culture led to changes whose consequences were to have a decisive impact on the course of universal history. This view does not reduce Greek political development to a long revolution culminating in democracy; the primacy of politics should, rather, be understood in a way that allows for significant variations within the overall framework of the *polis*. Nor can we explain the Greek innovation in terms of general characteristics of the city-state. To subsume the *polis* under the category of the city-state is to miss the original



features which set it apart from the whole spectrum of political forms common to older civilizations. Archaic Greece built its political institutions in explicit contrast to Near Eastern patterns of concentrating power and embedding the centre in a non-rationalised cosmic order. In so doing, the Greeks set in motion a long-term process that transformed their modes of life, action and thought in far-reaching and unforeseen ways. The political structures that thus came to play a decisive role in Greek history were more open to rivalry, debate and reasoning than the regimes based on varying mixtures of kingship and priesthood. *Agon* and *logos* were, in other words, integral components of the *polis*.

This inbuilt pluralism, dialectical agonism, and practical rationality of the *polis* gave a distinctive twist to the Greek chapter in the history of government. As recent work on the early *polis* has shown, its institutions bear unmistakable marks of rational construction. The rationalizing drive took a more reflexive turn with the development of political thought, which became increasingly capable of reasoned intervention in the conflicts and crises of the *polis*. But most importantly, the dynamism and autonomy of the political sphere transcended its boundaries and engendered a multiform process of cultural innovation. From epic poetry to tragedy and philosophy, the cultural genres most closely associated with the *polis* reflected its liberating impact on reason and imagination; at the same time, they transfigured the political substratum into projects and paradigms with a developmental logic of their own. The cultural creations of the *polis* were thus more capable of survival, diffusion and reactivation than was the fragile political order that had enabled them to take shape. They were also – at a further remove – more open to inventive adaptation, and this could result in the crystallization of rival or successive classicisms. As later historical epochs moved further away from the Greek political experience and became less sensitive to its unique features, the Greek cultural legacy became more available for appropriation in new historical contexts; this could, of course, lead to more or less utopian re-imaginings of the lost political world behind it.

The irretrievable uniqueness of Greek politics did not impede the traditionalization of Greek political theory. But the works that became cornerstones of Western political philosophy were written at a late stage and in response to an acute crisis of the *polis*; although Plato and Aristotle differed on perceptions, diagnoses and prescriptions, their theoretical projects shared premises and horizons that set them apart from the less systematic but more effective political thought of the preceding centuries. The revival of interest in this pre-Platonic tradition, long overshadowed by its canonized successors, is one of the more important recent developments in classical studies.

### III

The book begins with introductory reflections on the Greek tradition and its relevance to the modern world. Oswyn Murray focuses on the critical and subversive function of the classical legacy: since the end of antiquity, it has – in

various ways at various times – “been fashioned and understood as a counter-culture and a refuge from the dominant world-view”. A quasi-gnostic notion of initiation into secret wisdom is inseparable from such views, and when it gains the upper hand, the guardians of classical studies tend to cast themselves in the role of an esoteric sect. The late twentieth-century ascendancy of a capitalist monoculture makes it all the more urgent to retain at least the memory of traditional alternatives, and a public-oriented humanist version of classics is better equipped to address that problem than a hermetic one. Contemporary issues in architecture serve to illustrate the counter-cultural potential of the classical tradition; the ideas that thus come to the fore are ultimately rooted in the Greek political imagination.

Louis Ruprecht surveys the history of “Hellenic revivals”, and argues that they have been integral parts of cultural transformations in otherwise very different settings. One of the characteristics of the Greek tradition is a marked capacity to migrate across civilizational boundaries and maintain its vitality throughout major civilizational changes. The last major Hellenic revival in the West was closely linked to Romanticism, while the present phase of reexamination – accompanied, in some cases, by radical doubts – might be seen as post-Romantic in its spirit. As Ruprecht shows, the present period is characterized by renewed exploration of various approaches to the Greek legacy, but the new interest in political aspects stands out as particularly important: the retreat from Romantic images of the Greek polis does not rule out other ways of relating its experience to the problems of modernity.

Christian Meier tackles the central theme of the book in a synoptic essay that draws together ideas developed in his other writings. As he sees it, evolutionary theories obscure the singularity of the Greek experience and its exceptional impact on the subsequent course of history. The most innovative aspect of Greek culture was a far-reaching transformation of the very meaning of the political as well as its place and role in the overall context of social life; this began with a deviation from the monarchic pattern that had prevailed in all Near Eastern civilizations. The break with a previously unquestioned institutional framework was linked to a sudden and all-round civilizational revival after a long phase of regression. This helps to explain both the plurality of *poleis* and the internal pluralism of each *polis*; the abrupt expansion and intensification of social activity prevented the consolidation of exclusive power centres.

The restructuring of the political sphere opened up new possibilities for political thought. Kurt A. Raaflaub explores this field and notes several salient features. As he shows, the trajectory of Greek political thought was a long-term process, coextensive in time with the development of the *polis* from archaic beginnings to the crisis at the end of the classical phase. It found expression in different cultural genres: epic poetry, tragedy, historiography and philosophy. This cultural plasticity enhanced the autonomy of political thought; it must be seen as a formative force in the history of the *polis*, rather than an ideological instrument or disguise of more material forces. The impact of ideas on history seems to have been particularly significant at some critical turning-points, e.g.

the reforms associated with Solon and Cleisthenes (in view of that, it is all the more remarkable that the same does not apply to the democratic revolution in Athens: it was not guided by a new intellectual project). Political thought developed in a pan-Hellenic context, and this was essential to its progress; but at the same time, it remained bound to the *polis* as an unquestioned framework for its field of inquiry. Finally, the long-term direction of political thought is best understood in relation to the problematic of order: it shifted the boundary and redefined the relationship between cosmic and social order.

Jean-Pierre Vernant discusses another aspect of the same problematic: the political background to Greek forms and transformations of rationality. He sees Greece as a "privileged domain" in that it can alert us to the interconnections of belief and rationality, too often treated as polar opposites. Their common embeddedness in the life and thought of the *polis* makes the affinities more visible. The religion of the *polis* is undogmatic, open to poetic elaboration and therefore not incompatible with growing awareness of the role of fiction; conversely, the rationalizing counter-currents did not take a polarizing turn: "there is no radical criticism because affirmation does not take a deliberate and dogmatic form which would give rise to a sort of complete negation". Religion and rationality develop, adapt and communicate within a shared framework grounded in the *polis*.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet analyzes Greek ways of demarcating the human domain from animal and divine realms. The earliest available sources show how essential sacrifice and hunting were to the Greek understanding of the human condition; but as the institutions of the *polis* took shape and gave rise to corresponding modes of thought, the archaic imaginary was overlaid or absorbed by ideas which emphasized the primacy of politics: "political life becomes the criterion that separates civilization from barbarism and – in the last instance – humanity from animality". This is, however, not the whole story. Orphic, Pythagorean and Cyclic counter-traditions – hard to identify in precise terms but clearly representative of a persistent trend – experimented with inversions and subversions of the polarities central to civic orthodoxy.

Athenian tragedy was, as various authors have shown, one of the most important expressions of political thought. Cornelius Castoriadis compares two of the most significant tragedies, Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and Sophocles's *Antigone*, and argues that the contrast between their respective images of Man reflects a fundamental shift in the self-understanding of the *polis*. Where Aeschylus "presents the passage to the human condition as a gift, as the decision and action of a superhuman creature", Sophocles sees the human being – from the outset – as "defined by virtue of his self-creative action, by virtue of self-teaching". This change to the anthropological frame of reference is closely related to other intellectual currents in democratic Athens. The question *what is anthropos?*, posed by both poets but answered in a strikingly different manner, is at the centre of the Greek Enlightenment.

Johann P. Arnason discusses comparative approaches to the Greek experience, and singles out ideas developed by Castoriadis and S.N. Eisenstadt. For Castoriadis, the practical discovery and ongoing theorizing of autonomy – in the sense of

society's self-instituting capacity – is the most unique and momentous aspect of the Greek achievement. Eisenstadt stresses both parallels and contrasts to other “Axial” civilizations (the “Axial transformation” is defined in terms of new visions of transcendental as opposed to mundane order). Both views throw some light on the Greek case and converge in their emphasis on cultural creativity, but neither of them does justice to the specific characteristics of the *polis* and the impact of its internal dynamics on all areas of social life. Neither the over-generalized concept of autonomy nor the over-homogenized model of Axial civilizations can capture the most distinctive features of the Greek political breakthrough.

The two last papers deal with modern responses to and projections of Greek models. In the modern context, components of the Greek tradition are reactivated and reinterpreted in multiple and often divergent ways, but such metamorphoses also open up new perspectives on the original source. Peter Murphy discusses Greek ways of city-making and their enduring influence on modern projects. Of particular interest to him is the Greek-Ionian vision of the *kosmopolis* (ordered city) – an image of the city that repeatedly over centuries made its influence felt on constitutional frameworks, philosophical conceptions and classical architecture. Its precipitate opening of an “order that embraced strangers” – not always easily reconciled with other aspects of the *polis* – foreshadowed the tradition of the universal city in which city-dwellers’ ability to make and to act was deemed more significant than their genealogy or origins. The medieval and modern versions of the universal city – from Rome and Constantinople to Florence, Paris and London – both absorbed and negated the Hellenic pattern. In modernity, “estrangement from origins”, as a source of creativity, remained visible in many political, aesthetic, and constructivist milieus, yet the modern project of nation-building drew on the *polis* in ways that were fundamentally at odds with the universal city, invoking instead an autochthonous model of Greekness that is only now being fundamentally questioned.

Like cosmopolitanism, tragedy has been one of a number of Greek cultural forms that have been subject to seemingly endless adaptation, interpretation and transformation. The genre of tragedy was one of the most distinctive Greek inventions, and its later history exemplifies the interplay of paradigm and re-invention. The reference to tragedy as a metaphor of the modern cultural predicament is perhaps the most extreme case of imaginative but not arbitrary updating of classical ideas. Vassilis Lambropoulos analyzes this key theme in modern cultural theory, with particular reference to Simmel’s seminal essays on the tragedy of culture. Simmel reformulated Hegel’s distinction between subjective and objective spirit in such a way that their interaction could be seen to culminate in a tragic situation of “unresolved mutual attraction and revulsion”. In so doing, he opened up a new field of discourse that encouraged the modern revolt against form as such. His successors – from Adorno to Baudrillard – have explored tragedy as “prototype of existential alienation” with the consequence that, for much of the 20th century, form and form-giving have been viewed with considerable suspicion. Better then, like Simmel, to elevate “life” above form. As

Lambropoulos describes, the 20th century came to be enchanted by expressionist values, subjective culture, and aesthetic discontent. The turn against the objectifications of form (the impersonal Greek figuration) was abetted by the classical ideologies of the 19th century that had reduced the contours of form to an eclectic set of aesthetic signs. However, in spite of the expressionist and chromatic coloration of the 20th century, the power of the lucid figure, together with the Greek facility for sparse incision and economy with materials, was never entirely expunged. As the essays in this volume attest, the discipline and the clear-cut boundaries of form remained important for intellectuals and artists attracted to the dramaturgical frankness, not to say agonal sharpness, of the Hellenic legacy – a legacy that for all of the prognostications of its passing, will not lie down and die.

Johann P. Arnason

Peter Murphy

## Gnosis and Tradition

Oswyn Murray

I have no idea what the significance of classical philology would be in our age, if not to have an unfashionable effect – that is, to work against the time and thereby have an effect upon it, hopefully for the benefit of a future time.

Friedrich Nietzsche,

"On the Utility and Liability of History for Life",

*Unfashionable Observations*,

trans. R.T. Gray (Stanford 1995) 87.

The group in the Library are discussing sailing to Carthage; they cannot decide whether it is *epi* with the dative or the accusative. Our hero is pretending to read the index of a book on sociology.

Segregation. Self. Self-concept. I looked down at the index and racked my brains for the case they were looking for. The Greeks sailed over the sea to Carthage. To Carthage. Place whither. Place whence. Carthage.

Suddenly something occurred to me. I closed the book and put it on the shelf and turned around. 'Excuse me?' I said.

Immediately they stopped talking, startled, and turned to stare at me.

'I'm sorry, but would the locative case do?'

Nobody said anything for a long moment.

'Locative?' said Charles.

'Just add *zde* to *karchido*,' I said, 'I think it's *zde*. If you use that, you won't need a preposition, except the *epi* if they're going to war. It implies "Carthage-ward," so you won't have to worry about a case, either.'

Charles looked at his paper, then at me. 'Locative?' he said, 'That's pretty obscure.'

'Are you sure it exists for Carthage?' said Camilla.

I hadn't thought of this. 'Maybe not,' I said, 'I know it does for Athens.'

Charles reached over and hauled the lexicon towards him over the table and began to leaf through it.

'Oh, hell, don't bother,' said Bunny stridently, 'If you don't have to decline it and it doesn't need a preposition it sounds good to me.' He reared back in his chair and looked up at me. 'I'd like to shake your hand, stranger.' I offered it to him; he clasped and shook it firmly, almost knocking an ink-bottle over with his elbow as he did so. 'Glad to meet you, yes, yes,' he said, reaching up with the other hand to brush the hair from his eyes.

I was confused by this sudden glare of attention; it was as if the characters in a favorite painting, absorbed in their own concerns, had looked up out of the canvas and spoken to me.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must surely admit the psychological truth that lies behind Donna Tartt's description of the initiation rite that admits the narrator Richard Paffenbarger into the charmed circle of the Greek class at Hampden College,

Vermont in her popular novel *The Secret History*<sup>1</sup> – a novel which rests indeed on the premise that the study of the Classics is itself an esoteric activity serving to define a group of the elect who stand outside normal society.

It is almost inevitable in the modern educational system that all of us will have experienced the call to the Classics as such a conversion on the Road to Damascus, a demand to leave the normal and everyday society, in order to embark on some enterprise of enormous cultural and spiritual significance, involving years of preparation in activities regarded by others as useless and unremunerative. I still remember vividly my own conversion – the refusal of my teachers at the age of eleven to let me learn Greek, because French was easier and I lacked the necessary linguistic flair. A forbidden language in a secret script became the object of my dreams, and a reality that a few years later I willed on myself as a refuge from a hostile world. I remember too the long and solitary hours spent counting out my shillings in the vast and rambling bookshop of our local cathedral town, where the libraries of the canons and the clerics of a century earlier had ended their days in a dusty upstairs room full of titles and indeed whole books in Latin that no-one had disturbed for decades. In these cracked and worm-eaten leather-bound volumes lay I was convinced the secret that my boring teachers and my trivial contemporaries were unable to comprehend.

The power of that image has recently been reaffirmed. What is it that makes the English Patient in the recent movie so irresistibly mysterious? It is of course his mask, the fact that his identity is concealed behind a barrier through which only the workings of his own memory can penetrate. But it is also the fact that the record of his past is contained in a book interleaved with mementoes. This book is of course Herodotus, the symbolic traveller and restless soul, whose work invites modern interpolations: the Odyssey was presumably too well known, and the Epic of Gilgamesh too obscure to function as an icon, though each of these would have done as well to symbolise the theme of adultery which the story of Carthage's wife reveals when told around the camp fire in the desert by Katharine Clifton (Kristin Scott-Thomas), the future adulteress herself. It is the book of Herodotus (though presumably in English translation, for the Count shows no knowledge of the original Greek) which establishes Count Almásy (Ralph Fiennes) as a special person, one of the elect. As a result I am told there is not a single copy of Herodotus to be found in all the bookstores of the USA, and the same is certainly true of London; while even Oxford (where the supply is greater, and many of those who went to the movie already owned a copy) sold out briefly. I was even interviewed on the BBC World Service about this phenomenon – what would people today gain from a reading of Herodotus? Not actually a difficult question, for the answer is simply wisdom, and understanding of other cultures – knowledge that the lightning strikes always the tallest trees, and that countries that were once great are now small, and those that in our time are great were once also small. For Herodotus is quite simply the first and I believe the greatest work of western prose, to be read as the first step in whatever canon of the ten best

<sup>1</sup> Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (New York 1992) 22–3.

books you prefer, from the Bible (Vulgate or Authorised) to Tolstoy and Proust. But I digress; for Herodotus, though apparently today a symbol of the elect, is not an esoteric work.

This conception of the classical tradition as defining a group of the elect, is not a new phenomenon, and has little to do with the alleged decline in the teaching of Classics in the last generation. While it is true that Italy is now probably the only country in the world where classical studies are taken seriously as an intrinsic part of the secondary curriculum of the *liceo classico*, the idea that the study of the classics was once widespread elsewhere is an exaggeration: only perhaps in the period from 1850 to 1914 was this even remotely true for most western countries. We should not become obsessed with the position of the Classics in that short period at the end of the nineteenth century, when, under the influence of German *Altertumswissenschaft* classical learning became the badge of an international elite; then Thomas Gaisford could end a sermon in Christchurch Cathedral by saying, "And in conclusion, let me urge upon you the value of the study of the ancient tongues, which not only refines the intellect and elevates above the common herd, but also leads not infrequently to positions of considerable emolument."<sup>2</sup> And in the United States Thorstein Veblen in 1899 could characterise the Leisure Class by their education:

The ability to use and to understand certain of the dead languages of southern Europe is not only gratifying to the person who finds occasion to parade his accomplishments in this respect, but the evidence of such knowledge serves at the same time to recommend any savant to his audience, both lay and learned. It is currently expected that a certain number of years shall have been spent in acquiring this substantially useless information, and its absence creates an assumption of hasty and precarious learning, as well as of a vulgar practicality that is equally obnoxious to the conventional standards of sound scholarship and intellectual force.<sup>3</sup>

But the fact remains that, outside this brief period of the second half of the nineteenth century, the deep study of the Classics, that is the study of both Latin and Greek, was never a widespread phenomenon, even among the educated.

But neither was or is the tradition dead. A month ago I was in Blackwell's Classics department in Oxford at the same time as a visiting American family – husband, wife and two young children. The father (who was not, to judge from the purchases he had made, a professional scholar, but an enthusiastic amateur) was just arranging the trans-shipment of books worth a couple of thousand dollars, when his daughter's voice rang out clear: "who was Nestor's son?" "Peisistratus of course," her brother replied. I felt as if I had stumbled upon an occult sect still perhaps practising the ancient pagan initiations in some rural corner of New England.

The gnostic element is intrinsic in the nature of our studies. Initiation is an essential aspect of education, and those educated will always look back on their experience as a process of enlightenment. The more difficult the process, the greater the barriers and the preparation required, the more significant the rite of

<sup>2</sup> Gaisford quoted in H. Lloyd-Jones, *Blood for the Ghosts* (London 1982) 82.

<sup>3</sup> T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London 1970) 255.



passage becomes: no-one attributes transcendental meaning to the learning of the twelve times tables; but the progress through (until recently) some dozen or more years of life towards a degree in Classics – and even now, with more efficient and later language teaching, it still takes almost half as long – signals that the reward in wisdom and power must be commensurate. The feeling that there is a secret knowledge, a *kryphios logos*, known only to the initiate, has always been a central aspect of the classical tradition. Yet there is a dangerous confusion here: because special knowledge is required to understand a discipline, that does not imply that the discipline is necessarily a secret in the possession of a group of the elect. Skills may be difficult and confined to a small group, without in any way creating secret knowledge with a higher status.

At a very early stage this vision of ancient learning as providing access to esoteric truths was combined with another and more important aspect of the classical tradition. There is indeed considerable truth in the belief that the classical tradition has always since the end of antiquity been fashioned and understood as a counter-culture and a refuge from the dominant world-view. That is one of the more significant aspects of its enduring power. Each generation in the classical tradition has indeed created a new synthesis in opposition to the dominant ideology. Already the neo-paganism of late antiquity from the age of Julian onwards was a counter-image to the new force of Christianity, with a cultic organisation, a theology, a sense of ritual and a priesthood which owed more to Christianity than to paganism. Yet despite its reliance on Christian forms it was a refuge from the dominant ideology; and after its public collapse lived on as an esoteric sect for the chosen few in neo-Platonism and the Hermetic tradition. Classical learning and the pagan tradition had already become the weapon of the opposition to orthodoxy. Thus began the long and secret history of the classical tradition, based on the confusion of these two elements, the gnostic and the subversive.

From time to time a small group of the educated would seek to impose again the standards of a past age. In the sixth century, the ancient *eloquium Romanum* was praised in Ostrogothic Italy by Ennodius. Those educated in antiquity tended always to regard themselves as an exclusive brotherhood of the elect. We do not know, though we may well suspect, how many of the patient copyists of pagan subversive texts from Lucretius to Petronius in their frigid monasteries became admirers of the ancient world, and were themselves corrupted by transcribing forbidden wisdom into joining the secret society; in the case of the great Latin forerunners of the high medieval poets, Virgil and Ovid, their effect on their readers is clear. In the age of Charlemagne the protagonists of the *renovatio* (as they called it) played at being court poets: Charlemagne himself was David, Alcuin was Flaccus, Theodulf Pindar, Angilbert Homerus. The early humanists from Petrarch onwards were no different. The ancient knowledge was secret knowledge, pagan wisdom, which gave an independent power that was at least in part incompatible with the teachings of Christianity. In this way it provided freedom of thought, but at the same time was often reinterpreted to fit the contemporary conception of esoteric knowledge: Ficino's Platonism is a christianised pagan mystery.

Even when the classical tradition became accepted as part of a dominant ideology, let us say from the 16th century onwards, it retained many elements combining esotericism with the idea of a counter-culture, supporting on the one hand alchemy and astrology, freemasonry and rosicrucianism, and on the other scepticism, hedonism and all forms of libertarian freethinking. But in the post-Renaissance period there is I think a crucial change, as the two aspects began to separate. For as counter-culture the influence of humanism has been almost entirely beneficial, in offering a different model of the universe based on reason rather than faith or revelation, in which the divine element accompanies without explaining the nature of the world and the forms of human society. It is hard to conceive of the modern world without that element of rational humanism which has enabled us to construct it in the past five hundred years. And that legacy itself raises the central question.

This question is of course, has the classical tradition lost its usefulness at the turn of the millennium? Have other ways of thinking independent of this tradition provided new structures for understanding the world? I do not of course mean in the relatively trivial sense of new scientific advances, such as IT or genetics; but rather in the sense that, "is our world view so different that there is no longer any point in considering where we came from and how we can use past models to help us understand the present?" That question has I think been a serious one ever since the Darwinian revolution, which encapsulated in a general scientific and social theory the reversal of the human relationship to time. For the ancients (as is well known), time past lay in spatial terms before us (*ante*), visible to the human intellect and capable of providing models of behaviour; time future lay behind us (*post*), obscure, invisible, unknowable, but not likely to be different from that past which we could see in front of us. Darwinian *homo sapiens* looks the other way, forward into a future in which biological selection underpins the notion of advances in all areas of human endeavour. The way may lie uphill, but somehow at the top we shall find the promised land spread out before us. We face the future resolutely, and the past is behind us. It is noticeable that most modern travellers prefer to sit in a railway carriage facing the engine, to see where they are going; the ancients sat with their backs to the engine, looking at the landscape they had passed through.

What then is the point of a tradition? Is it just an antiquarian indulgence, which panders to our weakness for desiring to inhabit a familiar world? Or is it more dangerous, an attempt to prevent change, or even to channel it into forms which are acceptable to conventional values? It is for instance only too easy to represent the classical tradition as not just established by but intended to perpetuate the values of a white urbanised male elite. Much of the most influential, most learned and most amusing of modern work on the classical tradition rests on the belief that tradition should be seen as error, inhibiting a correct view of the world by virtue either of ideological bias or of the tendency of the human mind to follow through logically from false premises to false conclusions. I think of writers as diverse in their attitudes as Martin Bernal, Lisa Jardine and Tony Grafton. But the history of ideas is not the history of the errors and follies of the past, however

much that may serve to amuse us or to reinforce our own sense of ideological superiority. It is rather the history of the choices that humanity has made in the realm of the free spirit.

There is indeed a secret history that has yet to be told of our own generation, the history of the classical tradition in Eastern Europe. I can only speak of those I have known both before and after the lifting of the Iron Curtain. But it is clear to me that during the whole period of Communism the classical past was felt by individual teachers and pupils throughout the Soviet zone as a secret world where the human spirit indeed remained free. In the last thirty years I have met so many scholars from the east who had one belief in common, that there were no barriers within this secret world to which we all belonged, and that they could find in the study of the classics a sense of the European past free of all ideologies; even at the worst times of the Cold War, when they dared not talk openly, they indicated in a variety of ways, between themselves and with those of us on the outside, their sense of belonging to a common counter-culture. This story follows on from that other great expression of the power of the classical tradition in our century, which also has still to be told: the story of the rebirth of classical scholarship in the west brought by the expulsion of the Jews from Germany and Italy. For the Soviet bloc I will mention in honour only those personally known to me as friends in the faith – Jan Pecirka, Pavel Oliva and his wife Vera Olivova from Czechoslovakia, Zbigniew Borkowski from Poland, Petru Cretia and his pupil Manuela Tecusan from Rumania, individuals of courage and vision who have added so much to my life. There are I know hundreds of others who have found in the study of the Classics the ability to transcend the ideologies imposed by their own societies. And the story continues today: recently I have visited Russia and the Ukraine, where there are many who continue to study the ancient cultures and to excavate ancient sites, without access to libraries and without regular salaries, in conditions of deprivation which we can scarcely imagine in our western subsidised academic world, and against the prevailing culture of a ruthless and often criminal neo-capitalism.

In the western world our answer to this question of the continuing purpose of the classical tradition must be to consider how far its traditional function as a counter-culture is still useful; in what should that counter-culture consist, and how can we distinguish it from the idea of an esoteric sect with a secret wisdom?

It seems to me that a pluralist society is intrinsically more able to adapt than a culture based on a single world-view. In the modern materialist age we need at least one and perhaps a variety of transcendent goals in order to protect even a Darwinian future: gene diversity is beneficial even in the realm of ideas. Capitalism was an infinitely better system while Marxism survived; only now are we beginning to see its intrinsic disadvantages as a monoculture. So we need alternatives, and these must be believable and useful ones. Traditional alternatives have a head start, simply because they are familiar and well rooted. Whether or not religion is believable, it is certainly useful in the moral sphere; but it does not help much elsewhere. The advantage of the humanist tradition is that it has a wide range of influence on action, and sufficient flexibility to engender new solutions

from within its intellectual framework. By chance no doubt, but by good fortune, it is also fundamentally anti-materialist. There is no place for concepts of self-advantage or the profit motive in the classical world-view. It is therefore an extremely effective counter-cultural phenomenon in the modern world of materialism.

How we use it is up to us; as Michael Baxandall has said in relation to art-criticism:

Influence is a curse of art-criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the inferential beholder will wish to take into account. If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X.<sup>4</sup>

A living tradition works like influence: it is we who take from the past, not the past that dictates to us. And a living tradition will therefore always and wilfully reinterpret the past, shape it to its own expectations and needs. For such reasons I do not believe that the future of humanism is in any danger at all. It is far better adapted than any other alternative to perform the necessary function of a counter-culture in the modern age.

The danger here is rather in confusing the role of humanism as a counter-culture with that of the classical tradition as a hermetic tradition, to which only a few have access. Let me illustrate this from one area of contemporary creative activity in which I have personally been involved – architecture.

In contrast perhaps to the other arts, architecture is quintessentially a public art form, requiring public acceptance and indeed public money on a huge scale if its visions are ever to leave the drawing-board or the competition portfolio. The discourse of architecture therefore possesses an urgency that few other art forms can equal: style and statement really matter, for it is they that persuade the client to support the venture. Architects are by far the most explicit and most coherent group of exponents of the classical in the contemporary world. There has always been a small group of neo-classical architects in the present modernist or post-modernist "wilderness" (as they would call it); recently the interventions of the Prince of Wales and his Institute of Architecture in favour of traditionalism have emboldened this group to establish themselves as a new revival in classical architecture. In Britain, Leon Krier, Demetri Porphyrios, Quinlan Terry, Terry Farrell, Robert Adam, have come forward as the leaders of a school that can no longer be regarded as simply a form of pastiche or the revival of a style. In the US the Classical Architecture League (represented at the Agon conference by Michael Lykoudis) is also beginning to play a major role in architectural thinking. In their attempts to express the underlying principles of their architecture and their conception of urban planning, the architects of this group make use of a wide variety of appeals to the classical tradition, which for them is very much alive.

When such architectural theorists discuss ideas related to urban planning and the style of urban life, it is easy for them to make use of concepts of humanism

<sup>4</sup> M. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven 1985) 58–9.

and rationalism related to classical thought. Ideas such as public and private space, community values, co-operation and collaboration, small size, absence of private display, social unity, are intrinsic to the ancient conception of the *polis* – even if sometimes the classical Greek perception remains too radical for us: I have not yet found a post-modern architect proclaiming the virtues of those identical Chinese-commune style boxes, such as we find in the great planned cities of the ancient world like the Piraeus, Olynthus and Priene, as the model for modern private housing; nor do many architects today want to abolish all forms of private patronage in favour only of democratically designed public projects. The classical vision in its entirety may be too extreme for us; but we can still make use of the essential emphasis on functional and rational planning, and its sense of the centrality of the idea of the community over the individual. Here classicism provides what we might call the element of counter-culture in an architectural world-view which seeks to assert humanist values, against the dominant tyranny of individualism, profit-making and self-interest in an anonymous megalopolis which is increasingly experienced as uninhabitable.

What worries me is the move from humanism as counter-culture to the classical tradition as the repository of secret wisdom. This danger is well illustrated by the example of the architectural historian Joseph Rykwert's recent meditation on the meaning of the classical column.<sup>5</sup>

The column has always been the badge of classicism: it is indeed a peculiar architectural element. What is it that is signified by the column even in the context of classical architecture? This is a question that has puzzled writers on ancient and modern architecture since the Greeks themselves, and it is clearly a question with many answers. We may talk about it in terms of origins: we may trace the classical column back to columniated buildings in ancient Egypt, in the Near East, or in Minoan Crete – for it is clear that in a certain sense the classical Greek column owes something to earlier civilizations. Here we will be faced by parallels such as the Egyptian use of the vegetal or palm-leaf capital, which clearly has analogues in the development of Corinthian acanthus capitals; but there will also be discontinuities, as for instance the fact that the Minoans set their columns "upside-down", with a taper towards the base. It is hard to credit those modern scholars who believe that there is a practical reason for this, to prevent wooden columns "rooting"; but it may well be symbolic. Is it just an historically conditioned response that makes us find this inversion of the natural aesthetically unacceptable? And if we think the upwards tapering column more "natural", because we are conditioned by the observation of trees, did the Minoans reject that analogy? Was their practice not deliberately intended to represent the triumph of culture over nature?

Is there then a functional meaning to columns? Early buildings often had twin columns to emphasise the entrance to an important building by creating a formal protected porch. Other buildings (such as that from about 1000 BC discovered in

<sup>5</sup> J. Rykwert, *The Dancing Column: On Order in Architecture* (Boston 1996). In this discussion I repeat views first published in a review of Rykwert in the journal of the Architectural Association School of Architecture, *AAfiles* 33 (1997) 96–9.

how did such an original function become ossified, to survive first in wood and terracotta buildings, and then in hard stone buildings, neither of which have functional need for the column?

Does decoration also relate either to earlier models or to earlier materials? Is the column capital in origin an architectural feature derived from wood construction; is its leafy summit an allusion to the previous life of the material or simple decoration? Does the fluting of a column replicate either tree bark or wood graining or primitive chiselled decoration? If so, why are the earliest versions of classical Greek columns devoid of vegetal features, while only later types have decoration recalling bark or leaves? Vitruvius was prepared to derive almost all the distinctive features of classical architecture from the carpentry of wooden buildings, which suggests a singular failure of the Greeks to appreciate the qualities of stone.

What would such vestigial survival of lost original forms or materials mean centuries later? We talk as if the discovery of the original use of the column might tell us something intrinsic about all subsequent uses. Perhaps it would: Demetri Porphyrios for instance (in an idea which Rykwert shows to have already been formulated by the Abbé Laugier in the eighteenth century) talks in almost mystic terms of the creation of "tectonic fiction out of the constructional necessities of building": all building alludes to the earliest functions and materials, and the tradition of architecture represents the continuum of the spirit of *homo faber*, or "construction man".<sup>6</sup> The column, like the artful recreation of a prehistoric village plan, is an example of the embedded role of functional metaphor in the history of human building.

But columns are also symbolic, again by virtue of the history that they have undergone. The classical column was used initially for temple building, and later for the designation of monumental or public buildings, to mark out whatever type of building a particular society thought important. That function has continued to the present day, where columns distinguish banks and government offices, or extensions of the National Gallery: they have long ago lost any need even to appear to perform functional activities, and can merely be applied as surface decoration like pin-stripe trousers, to proclaim the importance of the wearer.

The symbolism can be even more precise, and even more contradictory. Recently in 1995 at the Classical Architecture League conference in Chicago a basic split was revealed between European and American uses of the column. To Americans the column is the architectural symbol of independence and democracy: the triumph of neoclassicism ensured that the young Republic proclaimed its freedom and its adherence to the constitution in columniated buildings across a continent. But to the European eye columns were more sinister: symbolic of the glory of an *ancien régime* and of the bloody revolution that overthrew it, by the

<sup>6</sup> Demetri Porphyrios, *Classical Architecture* (London 1991).

nineteenth century they already presented a more ambiguous message than the arch. In our own generation the use of the column in Europe has been especially connected with totalitarianism, from Mussolini and Hitler to Stalin and Ceausescu. The European column is essentially anti-democratic; and the struggle of architects from each side of the Atlantic to find common ground by forgetting some part of their inherited symbolic logic was one of the more unexpected features of a conference that had come together basically to celebrate the column.

Columns do indeed have their negative aspects, especially when separate and completely divorced from any building function. The triumphal column began with some justification, as an enormous stone replica of an ancient book scroll, pulled out to reveal its message and decorated in strip cartoon fashion with the story of a war; Trajan intended his column to be read as a book by tourists circling the galleries of his library, in whose courtyard it stood. Late antiquity set a fashion for triumphal columns decorated with inscriptions and topped by statues, perhaps because the dynasts of that age no longer had the skill or the resources to erect a fully columniated building. In a grotesque parody of this practice Christian holy men sat on top of columns all over Syria. This was in part a visible sign of the triumph of Christianity over the ruins of ancient temples, and in part a mortification of the flesh – since columns were not really made for comfortable living, and the Devil might always tempt the holy man to fall asleep, and so knock him literally off his perch. Even more dreadfully, Rykwert records a proposal by Adolf Loos in 1922 "to erect the most beautiful and distinctive office building in the world" in Chicago as a 32-storey Doric column; fortunately it was never built, for it was singularly ill-adapted to its purpose and aesthetically monstrous. More recently the phallic overtones of columniated architecture have seemed to proclaim the male dominance of the public arena, while the rounded arch has suggested a more private and female world of oriental seclusion.

Mythic origins, symbolic history, inherited function, in all its aspects the column lends itself to metaphor, whether as structural element or as decoration; and that may of course be part of the secret of its continuing presence in European architecture. But despite its huge learning, its wealth of ideas and its marvellous collection of new photographs often taken by the author himself, Joseph Rykwert's monumental work<sup>7</sup> is not so much a history of all interpretations of the column as an investigation of one particular interpretation, which he would claim to be both dominant and (if I understand him) in some sense essential, not just to the meaning of the column, but to the moral significance of all architecture. His argument begins from an observation first formulated for western architects in Vitruvius' discussion of the significance of the classical orders. Here the proportional relations of the classical temple are derived from the proportions of the human body, so that man (or anthropomorphic gods) become the model for religious architecture. Vitruvius relates this in particular by argument and myth to the orders of the classical columns: the Doric order is associated with the male, the Ionic with the female, and the Corinthian with the virginal; or (as John Shute

<sup>7</sup> Rykwert (*supra* n. 5).

portrayed it in 1563) the three orders are personified by Hercules, Juno and Venus respectively. In the core of his book (chapters VII-XI) Rykwert traces with patience and perceptiveness the whole history of this anthropomorphic argument in relation to the four orders (Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Tuscan), which often involved taking literally the presence of caryatids and giants as bearers of architectural weight, from buildings to title-pages. Why were people substituted for columns unless columns were thought of as people? Is it sexism that makes us more comfortable with the grim Atlantes of the great temple of Zeus at Agrigento than with the caryatids of the Athenian Acropolis: or are such bearers of weight symbols of the oppressed peoples of the ancient Greek city – the Carthaginian war-slaves who built the temples of Agrigento, and the women who lacked political rights in an ancient democracy? Yet if the Atlantes of Agrigento seem deliberately to strain under their load, "there is nothing browbeaten or slavish about ... the Athenian korai; on the contrary, to the naive, uninstructed eye, these last look serene and poised, sandaled and walking – almost dancing – with a light step".<sup>8</sup>

The detailed working out of this metaphor fascinated the theoreticians of architecture from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, when (as Rykwert shows) the theory of the orders was really invented; Bernini for instance claimed that all proportion derived from Adam's body, and was made by God's own hand in His image, and "the variety of orders arose from the difference between man's body and woman's – because of the differing proportions of each". Rykwert shows how this common doctrine pressed even the study of physiognomics into service in order to demonstrate that the profile of the various capitals was a reflection of the proportions of the human face. The most complete of these humanising treatises is the late fifteenth century manuscript *Trattato di Architettura, Ingegneria e Arte Militare* by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, which uses the human figure to establish all aspects of architecture, from the proportions of capitals to the correct elevation in church architecture and the principles of city planning.

But as Rykwert shows, the metaphor of the human body is not confined to architecture. The universe itself was made in God's image, and is therefore structured in accordance with the proportions of man. The heavens and the signs of the zodiac are often inscribed within a representation of man, who was a microcosm of the seasons, the humours and the planets; numerically for 1500 years the canon of the human body was literally the measure of all things, from musical harmony to the nature of the divine itself. This body metaphor lies at the heart of all ordering of experience within the classical tradition; this explains in turn why architecture, and religious architecture in particular, can be seen as a metaphor for the human condition, embodying all acts, all rituals and all beliefs, whether about the worship of gods or about death and the afterlife.

The metaphor of the column as body relates to the metaphor of the building as body, and to that of the city as body politic. All of these give rise to canons of

<sup>8</sup> Rykwert (*supra* n. 5) 133.



proportion, which for Rykwert, no less than for Vitruvius, express the natural dimensions of architecture; for true humanistic architecture reflects the proportions of the human beings who created it, and the anthropomorphic gods whom it celebrated. The pursuit of this theme creates an argument that is centred on the human body as analogy in the construction of the universe, rather than simply on its use in architecture. Physiognomics, the signs of the zodiac, the theory of humours, astrology, the cosmos as man, the concept of beauty as expressed in the classical canons of male and female figures in sculpture, all show how the order of the universe is imagined from antiquity to the present as bound up with the proportions of the human body. The origins of sculpture show an interplay between the aniconic representation of the anthropomorphic god as pillar and the architectural pillar as human being. It turns out that architecture and the hidden girl within the dancing column are only a small part of a far more wide-ranging theme – the history of anthropomorphism itself, the story of how man has structured the universe around the human form. Indeed for Rykwert this vision of man at the centre of the universe is not a mere historical phenomenon, but the ultimate and true message of humanism – man is indeed the measure of all things; and the practical consequence for architecture in the modern world is not necessarily an inert classicism as style, but rather a constant attention to the concept of proportion contained within the metaphoric image of the human form. So the column becomes neither decorative motif nor sign of order nor symbol of affection for tradition, but an expression of humanism in architecture. Modern architecture can even dispense with columns entirely, so long as its creations are imbued with the mathematics and the spirit of anthropomorphism. Rykwert presents a thesis potentially of fundamental importance, which is both a historical recreation of the world of human order that disappeared with the discovery of the autonomy of nature in the nineteenth century, and in addition a triumph of mystic humanism worthy of the Renaissance itself.

But what exactly is the truth in this neo-Vitruvian vision of the column as metaphor for the message of humanism in architecture and indeed in the western tradition? Has anyone in history, apart from Vitruvius himself and a few neo-classical disciples, believed that columns carried such a meaning? Has any modern architect ever thought of the column as more than mere decoration, or at most a badge of belonging to a style of architecture? Does a modern viewer when he sees a column ever do more than say, "ah this must be a public building, a town hall, a theatre or a bank" (and perhaps a secular building rather than a church or place of worship)? It may help us to find the cash dispenser, the ticket office or the enquiry desk, it may make us feel comfortable by offering us a traditional type of elegance. But does it deliver any transcendental message, encoded in a secret Vitruvian gnosis?

What is at stake here is the confusion between the superficial symbols of the classical tradition and the deeper significance of humanism. It is not the column that is important, but the concept of an architecture that subordinates rhetoric and style to an ordered expression of the needs of human society. And I suggest that this search for a hidden meaning in the column is simply one example of an error

that is repeated again and again in discussions about the classical tradition in art and literature, and in political institutions: the outward forms of classicism are not themselves the bearers of meaning, even when they may have a relationship to that meaning or help to indicate the presence of classical ideas. They do not require decoding to reveal a secret message. The message is already there, embedded in western culture. It is the message of humanism, which indeed remains in some sense a counter-culture, threatened as much today by modern forms of the irrational and religiosity – and now materialism and consumerism – as in the past. Our philosophy, our politics and our literature, our concept of the individual and of psychology are based on deep structures which were first formulated in the ancient world and have been continually reinterpreted throughout western history; so that we cannot engage in using our tradition, changing it or comparing it with other traditions, without recognising the millennial dialogue with the past. And it is I think these deep structures which really require investigation, rather than the superficial signs of continuity: it is more important to discuss what poetry and tragedy and epic signify in the western tradition than to trace the influences of past poets on their contemporaries; it is more important to discuss the fundamental ideas of freedom and democracy, or exploitation and slavery, than to trace the influences of ancient political thought on the Founding Fathers. These are not trivial or banal questions, and surprisingly many of them have not even been raised before. How far for instance is the western concept of pleasure determined by classical and humanist values rather than by biological laws or self-indulgence? It is no good fighting the powers of darkness with the weapons of Julian the Apostate, by adopting the style of the opposition and invoking an esoteric wisdom. We need rather to recognise that the western tradition is the humanist tradition, and it is that tradition which enables us to take control of our own future and liberates us from the irrationalities of the past.

The study of the tradition and its uses is not an esoteric pursuit and involves no secret gnosis. Our way of looking at the world is based on classical perceptions; and investigating exactly what those perceptions are remains the crucial way forward for western culture in its relationship to the modern world and to the plurality of alternative traditions. But I will not deny that gnosis is part of our tradition; and lest you think that I decry that effort to understand, preserve and value its secrets, having begun with one quotation from a novel, let me end with another. In his delightful fantasy of "The Professor and the Siren", Giuseppe di Lampedusa's journalist meets in his favourite *trattoria* a decrepit and cantankerous old man, who is slowly revealed as Professor (nay Senator) La Ciura, the greatest living Hellenist and expert on the Ionic dialect:

There's no denying it; we Italians, elder sons (or fathers) of the Renaissance, consider the Great Humanist to be the highest form of human being. The chance of now finding myself in daily contact with the major representative of this subtle, almost magical and unremunerative branch of knowledge, flattered and perturbed me. I felt the same sensations as a young American might feel on introduction to Mr Gillette: alarm, respect, and a form of not ignoble envy.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> G. di Lampedusa, "The Professor and the Siren (Lighea)" in *Two Stories and a Memory*

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This essay is not a learned paper, but a reflection on the contemporary meaning of the discipline to which classical scholars throughout the world have devoted their lives in the present generation. It was first delivered in April 1997 at a conference in Columbus, Ohio entitled *Agon*, on "the Common Place, Tragic Fate, Contemporary Return and Democratic Future of the Classical", where it was my great privilege to meet for the first time Cornelius Castoriadis, Agnes Heller and Mihály Vajda. Later in September I gave it at the autumn inaugural session for the young scholars of the Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington, at the invitation of Kurt Raaflaub and Deborah Boedeker; and in May 1998 I presented it to an audience of young German scholars in Freiburg at the invitation of Hans-Joachim Gehrke. Finally it served to introduce my series of seminars with practising artists (Paul Thomas, Tony Harrison, Christopher Logue, Chris Marker, George Steiner) at the Warburg Institute, London, entitled "Creativity and the Classical Tradition at the Turn of the Millennium", which was held from October to December 1999. Everywhere its message seemed to strike a chord, especially in the thoughts of the next generation. In order that this message should reach those colleagues in Eastern Europe for whom I have the profoundest respect in their past and present sufferings, it will also be published in a Festschrift for two heroes of the cultural resistance to tyranny in Czechoslovakia, Pavel and Vera Oliva.

(Penguin 1966) 81. For those who do not know this numinous parable of the classical tradition, it concerns a scholar who, as a young man, spent a summer in south Italy in a fisherman's hut by the sea. There he was visited by a Sirena, a mermaid, who, in the intervals of making passionate love to him and eating raw fish, taught him the inner meaning of ancient Greek poetry. Like Odysseus, the professor has heard the siren's song, and that is the secret of his power.

## Why the Greeks?

Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr.

To surpass Greek antiquity with our own deeds is the whole point. But to do that, you need to get to know it first! There is a kind of thoroughness which is only a pretext for inactivity. Think of what Goethe understood about antiquity – certainly not as much as a classicist, but more than enough to inspire him to the contest, and to make him prolific. You *should not* know more about a thing than you can embody in yourself. This is the only way really to *know* something: by striving to *recreate* it. Strive to live classically – this way you come a hundred miles closer to classical antiquity than through any amount of learning. Our philologists show no evidence of *emulating* antiquity at all – thus *their* version of antiquity has no impact on their students at all. A curriculum of *competition* (Renaissance, Goethe) or a curriculum of despair.

Nietzsche, *Wir Philologen* 5[167] [1875];  
*Sämtliche Werke* VIII, 88–89  
(Berlin 1967–1977)

### Introduction

At the ripe old age of eighteen, and astonishingly *unsophisticated* for my age, I stepped off the bus – wide-eyed and disoriented – onto the West Campus of Duke University. I had been there before on a campus visit, naturally enough, but this was my first time back since being admitted to the college. It was, in fact, the first day of Freshman Orientation. Armed with the so-called “Freshman Packet” – the maps and materials that would clearly label me *as* a Freshman for the remainder of the month, until I finally stopped carrying it around clutched to my chest like a life-vest – I had declined the invitation to take a guided tour of the campus, preferring to wander about on my own. As a result, I was hopelessly lost, disoriented by all the pretty stone, the complex of adjacent side-quadrangles, and the pseudo-academic frown of the gargoyles. To my credit, the upper class students seemed eager enough to help, and stopped me quite frequently to ask if I were looking for something. To my *discredit*, I pretended already to know exactly where I was going, which, of course, I could not have known at the time.

One low building, set prettily back in a copse of trees caught my eye, and I stopped to have a closer look. The placard on the well-groomed lawn really caught me up short, however, and I stood for some time in front of it, quietly musing, although at the time, I did not yet know what a Muse was. I was, as I say, not the most sophisticated young man ever to matriculate at Duke University.

"The Office of Greek Affairs", it read. *Greek Affairs*, I quietly wondered. Would there be an Office of Turkish Affairs as well? Of Jewish Affairs? Of French Affairs? Now, I had heard of "French affairs" before, had even read *Madame Bovary* in high school. But France is a very different country, and this was a very different state of affairs. It was quite some time before I learned what sorts of affairs *were* meant to be housed in such a building. It seemed to involve keg parties, cross-dressing in vaguely ritual settings, secret initiation rites, and general misbehaving. "We work hard, and we play hard", as one Bacchant put it to me at a party in that first week.

Clearly, this Greek thing can be interpreted in lots of different ways. But why has all of this energy been devoted to the reinterpretation of *Greek* – as opposed to, say, Turkish – things? Why, even when they are not being taught or talked about, is their absence felt so powerfully? Why are they still, millennia after the fact, the source of so much controversy and frisson? *Why the Greeks?*

### The Virtues of Display

This is, of course, a vast question. And the way in which I have asked it is so vague and overgeneral that it is extremely difficult to get traction on it. Joking aside, this question – *Why the Greeks?* – is not really about fraternities and the like. At least not directly, although the invocation of college fraternities does provide a sort of subtext to the debate. On the surface, the debate seems to be about the curriculum of North American higher education as much as anything else.

Now, these questions – about the future of fraternities and of the curriculum – may be related, in fact. The question about what to do with college fraternities (a rather contentious debate in North America just now), and of what to do with a Core Curriculum (gone at most of the more respectable college institutions, except for Columbia University), *both* seem to derive from a more general rethinking of certain essential campus traditions in the face of the massive demographic changes in this country and on our campuses in the past fifty years, and the ways in which our own curricular reforms have attempted to map out some of these important changes. The question of the place of *tradition* – in the intellectual life of the college, in the curriculum, and even in the campus' residential systems – is an urgent one. In both venues – in the curriculum and in the fraternities – "the Greeks" have suffered some serious setbacks in the past decade. Many campuses seem bound and determined "to get rid of the Greeks" altogether.

And there *are*, let me be quick to admit, some powerful arguments for doing so. This debate is not all pyrotechnic polemics, occasional appearances notwithstanding. The debate has, in any case, more recently prompted a sort of defensive rearguard action – again, in the fraternities as well as in the Classics – both institutions which see themselves clearly and quite legitimately under siege.

Now, the way I have just described these debates about “the Greeks” – whoever we think they are, or were – on our campuses makes it all sound pretty serious. I should therefore confess right up front that I am not sure it is as serious as all that. While I know that many colleges have disbanded their Greek fraternity systems altogether, the Classics will not disappear so easily. They will in all probability shrink even further than they have already done at some schools, but they will not disappear. In this essay, I would like to say a bit more about why I think this is so, and why I reject some of the more overtly apocalyptic posturing among some alleged friends of the Classics.

I come to these debates as a convicted Greek. The various intellectual and literary traditions we call “Greek” really do represent my intellectual lodestar, the intellectual constellation by which I orient myself and by which I have attempted to steer my own intellectual craft. I love the Classics, and probably would have majored in Classics at Duke if I had not been required to take up study of the relevant foreign languages. I was not a terribly sophisticated, or multicultural, student.

Therefore, I have never really felt the *need* to “justify” the presence of the Greeks in the curriculum. They have always been a part of my curriculum, and I love the stuff. But I do not believe that students can be forced or cajoled into loving the stuff – especially if they have been given powerful arguments to *resist* these various Greek and Roman intellectual traditions we call, rather curiously, “the Classics”. I am sure that it is this name – “Classic” – that makes some people nervous, right off the bat.

What I am trying to suggest is that the Classics cannot be justified theoretically anymore than History or Religious Studies can be. Few departments in a college would be able to withstand the close, and often hostile, scrutiny that Classics undergoes on an apparently daily basis. By taking up the challenge of offering a *theoretical* defense of the Greeks, those like myself who admire these traditions have essentially, if ironically, given up the game as lost. The best argument for the Classics – and this is the strategy I deliberately employ in my own classroom – is simply to *display* them, not to waste time arguing for my alleged rights to such a display.<sup>1</sup>

“Build it, and they will come”, we were promised in a recent film that fantastically recreated the world of baseball’s glory years. That attitude, or rather that faith, pretty neatly describes my own vision of the persistence of the Greeks in the college curriculum. Assign it, and they will come. Certainly my students have done so, at a variety of institutions.

<sup>1</sup> For more on this strategy, see my “Hellenism On Display”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 15 (1997) 247–260.

### Who Were "The Greeks"?

Having suggested that no theoretical *defense* of the Greeks' place in the curriculum is possible, let me now try to offer, instead, a theoretical *description* of why this question has the kind of urgency it seems to have for us, these days. In making this *descriptive* argument, I will also be explaining to you why I am not quite so troubled as some of my Classical colleagues are.

I find myself heartened by the fact that – speaking historically, rather than hysterically – there is nothing new about this question, *Why the Greeks?* In a sense, the question itself is an emphatically *Greek* question, posed by these peoples themselves in precisely that historical moment when they began thinking of themselves as Greeks (*Hellênes*), in addition to being Athenians, Spartans, Thebans, Cretans, or what have you.

Let me now engage in a brief scholarly reminiscence of sorts – in a fittingly, Platonic manner – reminding myself and my readers of some historical truths most of us will probably already know. What I want to do is to put these truths together in a slightly different and unusual way, in order to make a point.

After the collapse of the remarkable Bronze Age civilizations – "Minoan" in Crete, "Mycenaean" on the mainland, and "Cycladic" in the Aegean islands – there followed the period which we call the "Greek Dark Ages". This does not mean, as the name seems to suggest, that the Greek peoples in the Dark Ages were too stupid to come in out of the rain. Instead, it means simply that we are "in the dark" about them, given the comparative absence of archaeological and literary remains from this period. We have some impressive Geometric pottery, a few largish buildings in Euboea, and that is about all. The lesson of the Greek Dark Ages is a poignant one: it suggests that nearly all we value as "civilization" is more fragile and more tenuous than perhaps we like to believe. Civilizations – it seems almost astonishing to say something like this – can age, wither, and perhaps they can even die.

But then, somehow, somewhere, in the eighth century BCE, there dawns a new, barely flickering kind of light.<sup>2</sup> We know more than we used to know about the apparent *continuities* between those marvelous Bronze Age civilizations and their Archaic counterparts whom we call "Greek". Minoans and Mycenaeans, we now know, spoke a kind of Greek, and even worshipped gods by many of the same names their Archaic relations used.<sup>3</sup> It has been an important lesson, indeed, one which has transformed some of our understanding of some of the ancient world. These Bronze Age peoples in the eastern Mediterranean were, linguistically speaking, "Greek".

In the face of these astonishing continuities, it seems important to remember what was culturally different, *profoundly* different, about the Archaic Greeks. Quite simply, they began – ever so slowly, now – referring to themselves and

<sup>2</sup> The book that has fast become the standard work in this area is Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge, MA 1993). For a somewhat different account of these same matters, see my "Classics at the Millennium", *Soundings* 82.1/2 (1999) 241–276.

<sup>3</sup> See John Chadwick, *Linear B and Related Scripts* (Trustees of the British Museum 1987).

thinking of themselves *as Greek*. There were no "Greeks" in Mycenaean and Minoan times. The idea of "Greekness" is itself an incipient Archaic, and then resonantly Classical, idea.

That is why it seems important to recall how many genuinely transformative ideas emerge just now, at the tail end of the so-called Greek Dark Ages. *Literacy*, which had developed up to a point in the Bronze Age civilizations of Crete and Cyprus especially, but also on the mainland, now re-emerges after what appears to have been several centuries of literary dormancy. And now, quite impressively, the technology of writing is put to far different uses. The Bronze Age palaces had used writing, primarily if not exclusively, to catalogue foodstuffs and other trading supplies, as well as what had been devoted by whom to which deities. The technology of the written word was applied to the matter of material surplus.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, on the far side of the "Dark Ages", our first examples of "Greek literature" are the Homeric poems. What bears emphasizing is that these poems, despite the fact that they deliberately recall the splendors of the Bronze Age, place them in a narrative framework that the peoples of the palatial Bronze Age would not have recognized. The *Iliad* tells the story of "the Greeks" working together to lay siege to and eventually to overcome a fortified citadel on the coast of Asia Minor well to the east. And the *Odyssey* tells an even more astonishing story – namely, of how far-flung this Greek phenomenon appears to be. Almost everywhere Odysseus travels, he converses with Greeks, in Greek – until, that is, he is blown seriously off course *to the west*.<sup>5</sup> Homer, that is to say, depicts the rather astonishing – at least it *should* be astonishing – and really rather sudden emergence of a Greek world that thinks of itself *as "Greek"*.

The *sanctuary sites* of both Delphi and Olympia were significantly reorganized at this same time, as *pan-Hellenic* sanctuaries, places where any and every "Greek" might reasonably come to solicit, to worship, and to leave the requisite gifts for the gods. One of the things that was built in to both sanctuaries was the principle of panHellenism itself – the selfsame, dawning idea that we are, all of us, *Hellēnes* – whatever that name meant to them, at the time.

Finally, the *polis* emerged in the seventh century BCE as the dominant and most enduring political form throughout the Aegean basin.<sup>6</sup> The palaces have given way to *poleis* in the slowly emerging Archaic Age. And *what* strikes us about these city-states on the mainland is that they almost immediately take to *colonizing*. To the west on Sicily and the southern Italian peninsula (Napoli is a

<sup>4</sup> See Oswyn Murray (ed.), *Symptotica: A Symposium on the Symposion* (New York 1990) 3–5.

<sup>5</sup> See Bernard Knox's fine discussion of these and related matters in his Introduction to the new translation of the *The Odyssey* by Robert Fagles (New York 1996) 5–6, 25–28.

<sup>6</sup> A fascinating comparative study which attempts to situate the reorganization of the Athenian *polis* in the larger political culture of the eastern Mediterranean is Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time in Greek Political Thought From the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato*. Translated by David Ames Curtis (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1996 [1963]). See the review of the book by Peter Murphy, "The Triadic Movement: The Anti-Genealogy of Hellenist Marxism", *Thesis Eleven* 53 (1998) 102–113.



Latinized form of *Nea Polis*, or "Newton"), not to mention the southern coast of France (Nice was *Nikaia*, a common enough name in the Greek diaspora)<sup>7</sup> and the Iberian peninsula, as far east as Asia Minor and the southern coast of the Black Sea, and even south along the coast of North Africa in what is today Egypt and Tunisia, "Greeks" are on the move, spreading, building cities, expanding, and presumably subtly transforming the cultural landscape as they go. Several questions follow from this: What was the nature of this "Greek" revival? What was it in which they believed their "Greekness" consisted? And what made their understanding of what "Greek" meant so readily *exportable*?

These are unanswerable questions, I think. What we can and should notice, however, is how uncanny a transformation we will have witnessed by the middle of the subsequent century. Powerful *lyric* traditions emerge on Lesbos (Sappho and Alcaeus) and elsewhere in the very heart of the Aegean, like Thasos (Archilochus).<sup>8</sup> Other poetic traditions, like the *epinikian*, take off in and around the panHellenic sanctuary of Olympia itself (Pindar).<sup>9</sup> That same sanctuary will be used as a venue for newer kinds of literary production, such as *historical writing*. It was in Olympia that Herodotus gave his first public readings.<sup>10</sup> Distinctively Greek *theogonies* are written down and widely circulated (Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns). And a type of speculation which names itself *philosophia* emerges among the colonists on the coast of Asia Minor, and then takes on an interesting *second life* – what Socrates called a "second sailing"<sup>11</sup> – in Athens after the Socratic revolution replaces cosmological speculation with moral philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

And there, in Athens, in the stunning course of a single century, extraordinary ritual sites – from the Theater of Dionysus at the foot of the Akropolis, to the Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis (which Pausanias tells us is one of the two most astonishing, and hauntingly divine, places in all of "Greece", Olympia being the other one<sup>13</sup>) – capture the wider "Greek" consciousness. Tragedy emerges.<sup>14</sup> Comedy follows suit.<sup>15</sup> And so do several religious traditions

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Durrell, whose literary sensibilities and exceptional sense of place were always seasoned with a rich historical awareness, devoted the last year of his life to *Provence* (New York 1990), a meditation on his adoptive home in which he spends as much time among the Greeks and Romans as he does among his contemporaries.

<sup>8</sup> See Peter Green, "The Individual Voice: Sappho and Archilochus". *The Shadow of the Parthenon: Studies in Ancient History and Literature* (London 1972) 152–192.

<sup>9</sup> See Frank J. Nisetich, *Pindar's Victory Songs* (Baltimore, MD 1980) and D.S. Carne-Ross, *Pindar* (New Haven 1985).

<sup>10</sup> See David Grene (trans.), *The History: Herodotus* (Chicago 1987) 1–32.

<sup>11</sup> *Phaedo* 97c–100b.

<sup>12</sup> See Francis M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge 1966).

<sup>13</sup> Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* V 10.

<sup>14</sup> One of the real "classics" in this field is A.W. Pickard-Cambridge's *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy* (Oxford 1927). Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* [1872] is also suggestive for the way in which it pushes back the origins of many of these dramatic and liturgical developments well into the Archaic Age.

<sup>15</sup> See Francis M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (London 1914). An absolutely wonderful meditation on the relation between the two genres is Walter Kerr's *Tragedy and Comedy* (New York 1967).

which focus more explicitly on the destiny of the individual human soul.<sup>16</sup>

We should not make too much of Athens in a vacuum, and today too many Classics departments fall into that very error, by offering courses which suggest that Athens was the only "Greek" game in town. But we should not minimize the Athenian achievement either. It left a lasting imprint, on the Greek consciousness and on others. Athens could not be truly vanquished, quipped one frustrated Theban general, until its Parthenon was lifted up and removed elsewhere. It is easy enough to overlook this obvious cultural and historical truism: renaissances are city-phenomena.<sup>17</sup> When we tell the story of something rather grandly called "western civilization", we are really focussing on the comparatively brief trajectories of several remarkably creative cities. Athens is one such storied city.

When I was fortunate enough to live in Athens for two years, between 1988 and 1990, the Akropolis was directly in view of my veranda. I passed many afternoons sipping the local wines and watching endless busloads of tourists from all over the world climbing slowly and laboriously through the shimmering heat, making their hazy sorts of quiet pilgrimage to... I do not know what.

Athens has captured the consciousness of a substantial part of the planet, but for reasons that remain entirely unclear to many of us. The Parthenon has become a vast cultural symbol – but *what in the world* does it symbolize?

### Multiple Greek Revivals

Leaving that question to one side, for now, I want to state my central thesis: *The history of the larger Mediterranean basin after the so-called "Classical Age" may be viewed, in one sense, as a long series of episodic Hellenic Revivals.* And, for purposes of clarification, we might attach the name of a prominent city to each of them, since Greek Revivals, like all renaissances, tend to be *cited* phenomena. I will be mentioning Alexandria, Rome and Constantinople, Damascus and Baghdad, Toledo and Paris, Florence and Venice. Still later, and somewhat beyond the scope of my own tentative enquiry, other northern European cities – like London, Paris again, Munich and Berlin – will become important centers of Hellenic Revival, each of them boasting a Museum, among other things, to set the seal to this emblematic modernist Hellenism.<sup>18</sup>

First, and perhaps most surprising, then, the Diasporic Jews on the coast of North Africa had an Hellenic Revival – in Alexandria.<sup>19</sup> It was there, in the third

<sup>16</sup> See Helene Foley (ed.), *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Princeton 1994).

<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Peter Murphy for this insight. See his *The Scales of Justice: The Passage of the Civic Idea of Justice from the Classical World to the New World* (Amherst, NY forthcoming), as well as "The City of Reason" in Norman Crowe, Richard Economakis and Michael Lykoudis (eds.), *Building Cities* (London 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Such museums were, of course, filled with primarily stolen loot. See C.P. Bracken, *Antiquities Acquired: The Spoliation of Greece* (London 1975).

<sup>19</sup> Now, Alexander the Great could himself be viewed as a "convert" to the Hellenic, but that complex topic – the topic of Macedonian identity – lies well wide of my present purposes. See

century BCE, that the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, in that massive monument to scholarly creativity called the Septuagint. For those of us who think of Judaism as an emphatically textual religion, it is important to remember that Judaism was not always that way.<sup>20</sup> Once upon a time, things like temples, altars, ritual sacrifices and pilgrimage were the central religious categories – for Judaism, and for most every other religion in the world. The book of *Judges* presents a compelling, and often chilling, portrait of this tumultuous stage in Judean history and cult formation. Judaism was not always a *textual* religion, nor is it “always” so, now (that seems to be one of the things that characterizes the deep division between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry still).

I have become convinced that Judaism *became* a textual religion – custodian of the rabbinic traditions of text and commentary we all know and admire – during its own Hellenic Revival, in the Diaspora, in the eastern Mediterranean. The rabbis *learned* the tradition of text-and-commentary, I am suggesting, just as they learned to appreciate the metaphor, if not always the cult and practice, of athleticism.<sup>21</sup> From Greek scholars who had, by that time, been working on the Homeric poems for centuries. Rabbinic Judaism is, itself, in part the product of a Greek revival, a Judean Hellenic Revival.<sup>22</sup> (Still another permutation of this vast cultural eclecticism would of course be Christianity, a sort of heterodox Judaism that was alternately Hellenophone and universalizing).

The Romans, too, enjoyed a sort of Hellenic Revival. I will say less about this simply because it has all been said before. The Romans conquered the disunited Greek city-states, so the standard story runs, but Greek culture captured the consciousness of its conquerors. If imitation is the purest form of flattery, then certainly the Romans were powerfully affected. We see the emergence, in Rome, of any number of imitative Greek traditions: religious cults, from the traditional Pantheon to the Mysteries; theatrical innovations in comedy (Terence) and in tragedy (Plautus, Seneca); philosophical dabbling, especially among the social elites (Cicero is an excellent example, as Seneca and Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius are others). It is interesting to note how singularly impressed the Romans were by the things we tend to think of as “cultural”, and how singularly unimpressed they were by Greek military or political innovations, by and large. The Hellenic Revival in Rome, that is to say, was largely apolitical, although it had an enormous cultural impact. The vast majority of “Greek” sculptures that we

my “Of Coins and Carnage: Rhetorical Violence and the Macedonian Question”, *Soundings* 77:3/4 (1994) 331–366 for more on the Alexandrian connection to certain highly contentious contemporary claims regarding Macedonian identity.

<sup>20</sup>For more on the scholarly developments that helped “to make the study of Hellenistic Judaism one of the growth areas of late nineteenth and early twentieth century philology”, see Suzanne Marchand and Anthony Grafton, “Martin Bernal and His Critics”, *Arion* Third Series 5.2 (1997) esp. 20–24.

<sup>21</sup>See H.A. Harris, *Greek Athletics and the Jews* (The University of Wales Press, 1976).

<sup>22</sup>One of the most eloquent spokespersons for this perspective on Hellenistic Jewish identity is the classicist Pierre Vidal-Naquet. See his *The Jews: History, Memory and the Present* (translated by David Ames Curtis (New York 1996)) as well as my review of the book, “Jewish History: One, Two, Three”, *Thesis Eleven* 53 (1998) 114–125.

still possess are actually Roman copies in marble of Greek originals that would have been cast in bronze. Much of Greek culture is mediated to us similarly, through the custodial care of the Romans. So great was this Latinist impact that we today pay Rome the ultimate compliment by speaking of "the Greek and Latin Classics" as if they were somehow the same thing – which, of course, they are not. No college, to my knowledge, has an Office of Roman Affairs.

Now Rome did not, despite what Edward Gibbon would have us believe, "decline and fall". Rome had expanded its imperial grasp to the east and to the west – but especially to the east – and its center of cultural gravity had decisively shifted by the third and fourth centuries of the Common Era. Rome did not "fall"; its western provinces suffered significant military and political setbacks in the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era. But Constantinople – founded by Constantine in 330 CE, as a second imperial capital for the administration of the eastern half of the empire – was intact, and flourished throughout this same period. One might better say that the Empire had *moved* decisively east; it did not "fall". And Constantinople, in these same decisive centuries, became the cultural custodian of the Roman Greek Revival. The encyclopedic traditions, along with the texts and commentaries, were the singular possession of Byzantium; the Empire symbolized by the great warbird with two heads, Rome and Constantinople, twin eagles of one vast *imperium*. It is one of history's not-so-little ironies that our curious hybrid term, "Greco-Roman", is an accurate name only for this region, in this era. The so-called "Byzantine Empire" is the custodian of the only meaningfully "Greco-Roman" culture in the world.

Then came Islam.<sup>23</sup> Attending to the swiftness and decisiveness of the Arab conquests all along the eastern Mediterranean in the Eighth Century cannot fail to impress. Within twenty years of the death of the Prophet in 632 CE, these suddenly and dramatically united Arab forces had expanded in a stunning pan-Mediterranean pincer movement, westward along the north African coast, and northward to the shrinking borders of the Byzantine (which means simply "Roman" now) Empire. Damascus was taken in 635 CE, then lost, then re-taken in 636 CE. Jerusalem was taken in 638 CE, and Antioch fell in the same year. Alexandria fell to the Arabs in 642 CE, was re-taken by the Byzantines in 645 CE, and then was lost for good in 646 CE. Each of these cities, but especially Damascus and Alexandria, were central houses of Hellenistic culture.

It was then, and largely for that reason, that there was an Hellenic Revival among Arab intellectuals as well, especially in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. The region we know as "Iraq" – so often in the news, these days – had been open to Islam and the Arabs since the decisive battle of Qadissiyah in 637 CE. Of the three empires which the Meccan Arab forces faced in this early period of expansion and consolidation – the Byzantine (in Anatolia and elsewhere), the Sassanian (in the Iraq), and the Abyssinian (in the Sudan) – they successfully

<sup>23</sup>The indispensable study of these and other Muslim developments is Marshall G.S. Hodgson's monumental three-volume, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago 1961, 1974).

conquered only the Iraq. The Roman-Byzantine army in Syria (a provincial army, rather than the main force) had been defeated at the Yarmuk River in 636 CE, due in part to their Arab auxiliaries going over to the enemy at a crucial point in the battle. But the Arab forces were not yet strong enough to attack the Byzantine heartland in Anatolia, anymore than they were able to make inroads along the fiercely independent Abyssinian coast. It was only the Iraq that they made decisively their own in this period.<sup>24</sup> Baghdad eventually became the capital of the Caliphate, after Damascus had served for a period in this capacity, and it became an essential center for Muslim intellectual life as well under the Abbasids.

Between 750 and 1050 CE, an enormous body of Greek philosophical and medical literature (although not the dramatic or lyric poetry) was translated into Arabic. Most of this translational activity was managed by an intriguing religious minority in Baghdad: Syriac Christians, who were fiercely independent in matters of doctrine, who had resisted the claims of political and credal authority thrust upon them by Constantinople, and thus who had been a persecuted minority under the Byzantines. These Syriac Christians were conversant with the Greek language of their liturgy, the Syriac of their scripture, as well as with the Arabic of their newer Muslim patrons. They seem to have worked primarily with the Syriac translations of Aristotle that had been made centuries earlier.<sup>25</sup> In any case, this impressive body of work became widely influential in the Middle East and elsewhere. The cultural links between Baghdad and Constantinople were also mutual and long-lasting; they were not seriously disrupted until the relatively sudden emergence of the Seljuk Turks in this region in 1071 CE. And it was the Turks, of course, under the aegis of the Ottoman Empire, who would make Islam a force to be reckoned with in Europe, astonishingly, until the end of the First World War.

Thanks perhaps to these same Muslim Hellenists, some of these "lost" Greek traditions were re-introduced to European scholars through the Iberian peninsula. Muslims forces had invaded Spain already in 711 CE, and there they remained until 1492 CE. This impressive body of translated Greek material would have been transported to Spain as soon as it was available – certainly by 1050 CE. Indeed, the whole movement of the so-called "Baghdad Peripatetics" moved *en bloc* to Spain after the school succumbed in the face of increasing religious resistance in the capital of Baghdad.<sup>26</sup> Iberian cultural centers, like Toledo, were centers not only of the new Greek learning, but were also stunningly multi-religious cities in which Jews, Christians and Muslims could sit at the same table

<sup>24</sup> Hodgson (*supra* n. 23) Volume I, 200–206.

<sup>25</sup> This entire story has been well told by F.E. Peters, in his remarkable book, *Aristotle and the Arabs* (New York 1968) 57–67; see also Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society* (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries) (New York, 1998). On Arab appropriation of classical geography, see O. A. W. Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps* (Ithaca, NY 1985) 115–157, 166. Leo Strauss was the great popularizer of these Arab intellectual traditions in this century. See Catherine Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida* (Chicago 1996) 104–200.

<sup>26</sup> Peters (*supra* n. 25) 160–163, 221–237.

– to debate the finer points of Aristotelianism, if not necessarily the nature of a scriptural revelation. “The Greeks”, that is to say, gave these rival scriptural monotheisms a sort of intellectual common ground, and this is still another source of the Hellenic’s vast appeal, I suspect. In any case Ibn Sina (née Avicenna, 980–1037 CE), Ibn Bajjah (d. 1138 CE), and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE)<sup>27</sup> – not to mention the Jewish encyclopediast, Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, 1135–1204 CE) – all managed their massive encyclopedia of Aristotelianism fully a century before Aquinas (1225–1274 CE) began his in Paris. The Greek Revival we know as “Scholasticism” – that elenchic method of disputatious Aristotelianism of which Aquinas at the University of Paris is only *one* idiosyncratic representative – is the result of this same story of rich cultural cross-fertilization, which took root, briefly but decisively, in medieval Spain. In any event, the reintroduction of the Hellenic tradition in Europe, thanks to the vast corpus of Arabic *falsifah* and philology, made renewed translational work possible in Europe – from Greek into Latin, this time – which then made Aristotle more accessible to someone like Aquinas, who knew no Greek himself.

Now, in the interim separating the emergence of Islam from the medieval syntheses I have just been describing, a “European” event of some importance had occurred: the emergence of the Frankish/Carolingian dynasty, culminating in the long reign of Charlemagne (768–814 CE). It is probably Charlemagne whom we have to thank for the creation of a “European” consciousness in something like the form it continues to have today. It was Charlemagne who integrated the currency, the highways, and the trade routes; it was Charlemagne who regularized trade between the various cultural entities on “the Continent”. Even today, the so-called “European Community” boasts borders not so very different from the ones Charlemagne imagined. Moreover, those territories that were, in Charlemagne’s day, either “border” territories or “hostile” regions – Spain and Portugal, Italy and Greece – suffer still for their uncertain status in the contemporary “European Union”. Greece especially, as we will have occasion to say many times, *both is and is not* European. It was Charlemagne in any case who helped to construct a sort of “European identity”, arguably for the first time – an intriguing amalgam of Christianity and the retrospective imperial politics of Rome. For my purposes, this is an especially significant point. Charlemagne’s was a consciously *Roman*, not a Greek, revival<sup>28</sup> – in architecture, politics, and literature. That makes him surprisingly peripheral to the story I have been trying to tell here, the story of a series of *Mediterranean and Hellenic Revivals*.

Charlemagne’s antipathy to things Greek – which may also be read as a hostility to things Mediterranean – had a logic of its own, of course. In the ninth century, in Europe, “Greek” had taken on an entirely different valence; it meant

<sup>27</sup> Peters (*supra* n. 25) 215–220.

<sup>28</sup> Charlemagne was one of those Europeans who insisted that the Roman Empire had indeed “fallen” in 476 CE. He refused the idea that the seat of empire had moved east to Constantinople, since he refused to acknowledge the Romanness of the Byzantines at all. He framed himself as the grand rescuator of Rome, and his assumption of the title of “Holy Roman Emperor” in 800 CE was explicitly designed to make a break with Byzantium, and its “other” emperor.

"Byzantine" by now. And the European identity that the Carolingians were so instrumental in constructing was an identity defined largely against "others": against the Muslims in Spain; against the Byzantines in northern Italy and further to the east. Charlemagne, for his part, made war on both the Cordova Caliphate<sup>29</sup> as well as on the Byzantine Empire,<sup>30</sup> thereby marking his reign as a sort of prelude to the era of Crusades. And the Crusades – those curious wars of Frankish empire-building in the east, made in the name of religion but waged almost entirely against the two great enemies of Frankish Europe, the Islamicate and Byzantine empires – are where my story is headed now.

Two significant things happened to Constantinople in relatively rapid succession after the great era of medieval synthesis: a European event and an Ottoman one. The Venetians,<sup>31</sup> during the so-called "Fourth Crusade", laid siege to the Dalmatian coast, then diverted their forces to Constantinople, which they eventually besieged and sacked in 1204 CE,<sup>32</sup> carving out a rather short-lived Frankish kingdom among these Byzantine holdings which lasted for sixty years. The Byzantines, while they eventually recovered most of these lost lands, never fully recovered from the Frankish invasion.<sup>33</sup> They were, in any case, unable to withstand the crushing siege of the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE, when the city was lost and this part of the Roman Empire really did "fall", permanently.

Two points are worth making about these pan-Mediterranean developments. First, the one region which did not really ever enjoy a Hellenic Revival was the Byzantine region. They did not *need* a "revival"; they had always kept these

<sup>29</sup> Charlemagne campaigned on the Iberian border in 777–778 CE, where a Basque attack of his retreating forces provided the historical kernel lying behind the Song of Roland.

<sup>30</sup> Charlemagne's antipathy to the Greek Byzantines was multi-layered. After the resolution of the Iconoclast Controversy at the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 787 CE, he published his own position-paper on the matter, deeply critical of both sides. He then called a separate council of western bishops in Frankfurt in 794 CE, where it was decreed that icons could be present in churches but could not be venerated in any way. The doctrinal wedge now driven, Charlemagne next attacked Byzantine forces in North Italy in a series of campaigns that lasted until 798 CE. In 800 CE, he had himself crowned "Holy Roman Emperor", and in 803 CE the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle set the formal boundary between the now-divided empires, Holy Roman and Byzantine. See C.M. Woodhouse, *Modern Greece: A Short History*, 4th Edition (London 1986) 50–52.

<sup>31</sup> For the powerful, if complex, connection between Venice and the Byzantines, see Donald M. Nicol, *Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations* (Cambridge 1988).

<sup>32</sup> The ironic matter of the Fourth Crusade has enjoyed considerable scholarly scrutiny of late. For a contemporary account of the Crusade, see Geoffrey de Villehardouin, *The Conquest of Constantinople*. Translated by M.R.B. Shaw in *Chronicles of the Crusades* (New York 1963) 29–160. For some more recently translated manuscripts describing the looting of Constantinople, see Alfred J. Andrea and Paul I. Rachlin, "Holy War, Holy Relics, Holy Theft: The Anonymous of Soissons' De terra Iherosimitana," *Historical Reflections* 18:1 (1992) 147–175. For a brief description of how memories of these events still chafe at the Orthodox self-understanding, see Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York 1964) 67–70.

<sup>33</sup> See Donald M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261–1453*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge 1993).

increasingly encyclopedic traditions alive. They were always "Greek", *after* even when their name for themselves was, tellingly enough, *Romaioi*. Still, the Byzantines enjoyed periods of revitalization, the waxing and waning of cultural forces. The Emperor Justinian (527–565 CE) had closed the schools in the city, on account of their indelible paganism. Then, *and* of pushing the Platonic underground, back into the cave, it *reopened* in the period from 850–1050 CE, the age which represents the *heyday* of philosophical Hellenism in the state-sponsored schools of Constantinople.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, Baghdad had been heir to the very best Classicism that Byzantium produced.

And that leads to my second point. The Byzantines lay behind, and were the inspiration for, *most* of the Hellenic Revivals Europeans remember: the Arab, the Scholastic, even the Florentine and Venetian. The diplomatic ties between Byzantine lands and North Italy were millenium-long, beginning with the Emperor Justinian's bail-out of the western half of the empire in the sixth century, which had left much of North Italy culturally Byzantine. Subsequent to the Fourth Crusade however, the Genoese, and especially the Venetians, maintained extensive holdings in mainland Greece (which they gradually lost to the Ottomans in the early 1500s), some of the Ionian islands (Corfu was held by Venice until it was ceded to the French in 1797), in Cyprus (lost in 1571), and in Crete (which the Venetians held, amazingly, until 1715).

During the reign of the Byzantine Emperor, John VIII Palaiologos (1425–1448 CE), when the threat of advancing Ottoman forces became clear to everyone, east and west (Thessaloniki, the "second city" of Byzantium, fell to the Sultan Murad in 1430 CE), formal negotiations between the eastern and western churches began, with an eye to presenting a united Christian front against the Turks. The long-awaited Council met in Ferrara in 1438, then moved to Florence in 1439. It resulted in the formal, if ambivalent, end of the Great Schism of 1054 CE, and the nominal union of the eastern and western churches. But the so-called Crusade it promoted was crushed by the Turks in 1444 CE, after John VIII and his entourage were astonished to discover that support for this ecclesial conciliation was never more than lukewarm at home, in the east. As a result of this continued factionalism, some members of the Byzantine legation eventually returned to North Italy: Bessarion (c. 1399–1472 CE), Bishop of Nicaea and later a Cardinal, returned to Florence in 1440 CE and eventually settled in Rome, where he committed himself to the collection and translation of ancient manuscripts, most of which ended up in Venice; Isidore (1385–1463 CE), the Abbot of St. Demetrios in Constantinople and later metropolitan of Kiev, also escaped to Italy in 1441 CE, although he returned with two hundred Italian archers for the final defense of his city. Two other members of the original delegation – George Amiroutzes (c. 1400–1469 CE) and George of Trebizond (1395–1472/3 CE), a Platonist and an Aristotelian, respectively – also did much to popularize the traditions of Classical Byzantine scholarship in North Italy. The former remained in his

<sup>34</sup> Peters (*supra* n. 25) 23–27.



homeland after the Turkish conquests, but the latter, a native of Crete, ended his days in Rome. Surely most intriguing on this long list of Byzantine scholars and dignitaries was the man who did not stay: Georgios Gemistos, Plethon (c.1360–1452 CE), who stayed only briefly in Ferrara, then returned to the monastery at Mistra, overlooking ancient Sparta, where he organized his own fascinating, if short-lived, brand of Platonics.<sup>35</sup> Other members of the delegation, which numbered some seven hundred souls in all, also contributed to the Tuscan Hellenic Revival. To this impressive list of Hellenic popularizers in Italy, other names may be added: Theodore Gazes of Thessaloniki (c.1400–1475/6 CE), who lived in Ferrara, Naples and Rome after the fall of his native city, and who died in Calabria; Demetrius Cydones (c.1324–1398 CE) of Athens, who taught at Padua, Florence and Milan, as well as his pupil, Manuel Chrysoloras (c.1350–1415 CE), who also taught in Venice, Padua and Rome; and even Giorgos Scholiaros (c.1403–c.1472 CE), a student of Plethon's at Mistra after being a student of Platonics in Constantinople, who later became a monk, took the name of Gennadios, and was destined to become the first Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople after the Sultan Mehmed II's conquest of the city in 1453 CE – an event which prompted still another flood of exiled intellectuals to the Latin west.<sup>36</sup> Thus thoroughly ensconced, they helped to re-establish the very course of Platonic and Aristotelian studies that fed crucial portions of the Italian Renaissance and certainly helped to crystallize the long, proud tradition of Italian Philology – which is, in some important ways, the real precursor to our own, as Nietzsche argued so persuasively.

### When Revivals End

Now, this brief, and doubtless rather simplistic, walking tour through eastern Mediterranean history serves one important purpose and carries with it one important lesson. Keeping these sorts of things in mind may help us to put the Hellenic Revival of which we are a part in some better *historical* perspective. Doing so is crucial, I think, if our debates about the continued "relevance" of the Greeks are to have – as the saying goes – more light and less heat.

There have been *many* Greek Revivals throughout the Mediterranean basin: Jewish, Roman-Byzantine, Arab, Iberian, Scholastic, Florentine. Our own contemporary fascination with "Greek Affairs" is hardly newsworthy. There has been no more long-standing cultural "affair" in Mediterranean history. Each of these Greek Revivals, curiously enough, seems to have lasted roughly one hundred and fifty to two hundred years. Each faced significant resistance from a variety of (often state-sponsored) monotheisms. It seems to me that, when each of these Hellenic Revivals ran its course – did what it could do, re-energizing certain

<sup>35</sup> See Nikos Kazantzakis, *Journey to the Morea*. Translated by F.A. Reed (New York 1965) 117–136, and Nicol (*supra* n. 33) 342–346.

<sup>36</sup> See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Translated by S.G.C. Middlemore (New York 1958) I. 204–205.

essential social energies and rejuvenating a certain vital cultural self-understanding – then they petered out. What do I mean by that?

There may have been times (and I emphasize the “may”, here) when many people in Florence had read several Platonic dialogues, but that relatively widespread Hellenism faded relatively quickly. It is in the nature of a renaissance to *be* shortlived. One cannot be continuously born again, after all. In place of such a Hellenic Revival, the intellectuals became custodians of these traditions – and various forms of Classical Philology were born as a result. Hellenic Revivals can and do peter out. The Greeks do not matter to everyone. They never did.

The important point for my purposes, then, is this: In an Hellenic heyday, there is no reason to pose the question *Why the Greeks?* The question does not resonate. The appeal of the Greeks is obvious. Rather, it is when such a period of revival (that is what a “renaissance” is, after all) *begins to break down* that the question becomes urgent. We are living in such a period, historically speaking, now, I think. And the question – as our own increasingly volatile curricular debates attest – has some real teeth in it, for a great many people.

It is a little embarrassing to me how obvious the point I have been so long in making really is. Basically, what I am suggesting is this: When the centrality of a good, *Greek* education to the nurturing of human character, general human flourishing, or the pursuit of the good life is no longer obvious... well, then it is no longer obvious. And by then, the Greek “classics” are probably well past defending, *theoretically*. The Owl of Minerva, we might say, has already flown the coop.

### The Nature of Our Revival

And yet it is the very obviousness of what I have just said that calms my nerves when I listen to these seemingly endless debates about the Greeks. The good news in what I have been saying thus far is two-fold:

First and foremost, this has all happened before. Rather recently, I found myself slogging through the literary journal, *The Criterion*, edited by T.S. Eliot between 1922 and 1939, and designed to be, in his own words, “a valuable record of the thought of that period between the two wars”. It is instructive, or at least it should be, to see how frequent was the lament, even the public outcry, over the alleged loss of the Classical heritage. Clearly, the Classics have been a long time dying. And if they are not dead by now, then their condition is likely far from terminal.

But there is a second significant point here. Hellenic Revivals have come and gone, I have suggested. There should be no great contention about *that* claim. It is at the *tail end* of such a revival that my question – “Why the Greeks?” – resonates. The question resonates for many of us today because we are living at the end of *still another* Hellenic Revival that has largely run its course. What is important to do is to *locate* our own question-posing in its own time and place. We need to think more clearly about the nature of the Greek Revival *we* are living within, even if we seem to be at the end of it.

Which Revival is most immediately ours, then, curricularly and culturally? Not the Jewish or Roman or Arab Revival, and probably not the Scholastic or Florentine one, either. I suspect that the Greek Revival to which we are heir in the Academy is primarily an eighteenth and nineteenth century revival. By paying attention to the substance of *that* revival – the sorts of work *they* were asking “the Greeks” to do for them – we will be in a better position to understand what may be coming to an end now.

The seeds for this Hellenic Revival were actually sown in the previous century, in the seventeenth. It was then – starting as early as 1610, but more significantly in 1675–1676 when Jacob Spon<sup>37</sup> and George Wheler<sup>38</sup> made their famous trip through Greece,<sup>39</sup> continuing on through James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's trip of 1751–1755,<sup>40</sup> and then Richard Chandler's still more popular trip of 1764–1766<sup>41</sup> – that a surprising number of British and French (but not German) travelers made the long and dangerous trip to what was a disastrously poor, wildly exotic, and definitively “eastern” province of the Ottoman Empire. Greece, that is to say, both was and was not “European”. Many of these travellers wrote books about their travels, and the market for this traffic in Greek travel books was seemingly infinite.<sup>42</sup>

Now, Europeans were not travelling only to Greece, of course. The British had been travelling extensively throughout the Indian subcontinent throughout the 1700s, and even earlier, for economic reasons.<sup>43</sup> The French came to Egypt

<sup>37</sup> Jacob Spon, *Voyage d'Italie, de Dalmatie, de Grece, et du Levant* (Lyon 1678).

<sup>38</sup> George Wheler, *A Journey Into Greece* (London 1682).

<sup>39</sup> See David Constantine, *Early Greek Travellers and the Hellenic Ideal* (Cambridge 1984) 7–33.

<sup>40</sup> James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, *Antiquities of Athens: Measured and Delineated* (New York 1980 [1762, 1787, and 1794]).

<sup>41</sup> Richard Chandler, *Travels in Asia Minor and Greece, or, An Account of a Tour Made at the Expense of the Society of Dilettanti* (London 1817 [1775 and 1776]) 2 volumes. See also Constantine (*supra* n. 39) 188–209.

<sup>42</sup> Some important work has been done recently on the genre of travel writing, and I have become much interested in the topic myself. Mary Louise Pratt makes the important point [in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York 1992)] that “travel writing is one of the ideological apparatuses of empire” (6–7). She says so less to criticize the genre wholesale than to point out how, in the great age of discovery (and colonialism), travel writing served to produce a sense of Europeaness, largely by constructing an imperial image of “the rest of the world”. Travel writing thus becomes one essential ingredient in the great age of European naval exploration and discovery. For more on the intellectual climate created by such discoveries, see Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA 1992). For the way these intellectual and literary developments played out in Greece – which, as I say, both was and was not “European” – see Constantine (*supra* n. 39) and Robert Eisner, *Travelers to an Antique Land: The History and Literature of Travel to Greece* (Ann Arbor 1991).

<sup>43</sup> I have been much instructed by the work of my good friend and colleague, Paul B. Courtwright, on the complexity of the British colonial presence in India. See his preliminary work on this material in John S. Hawley (ed.), *Sati, The Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Women in India* (New York 1994). He is currently at work on a book-length study of the complexity of such colonial politics and identity.

with Napoleon in 1798–1801, and they immediately began excavating the territories they occupied.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, a great many European travellers continued to make the arduous pilgrimage to the Holy Land, also an Ottoman holding, in this century.<sup>45</sup>

Growing out of this sudden resurgence of international travel among European elites, and the significant market for travel books that it generated, it seems to me that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a great many European intellectuals became fascinated anew with four separate speculative traditions, each of which was also, vaguely but definitely, a *religious* tradition: the Indian, the Egyptian, the Hebrew, and the Greek. I am suggesting that there were historical, cultural and philosophical reasons for this.

But the matter was most complicated in Greece. French and British travelers had, as I say, been traveling there for quite some time. German-speaking intellectuals, most notably the amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, would not begin making the long trek to Greece until the 1860's<sup>46</sup> – which is doubly ironic, since so much of the Romantic myth of “the glory that was Greece” was a product of *German* intellectual life and letters.<sup>47</sup> “Greek Affairs” were put definitively on a front burner in Europe in the early part of the nineteenth century, during Greece's long struggle for independence from the Ottoman Turks (1821–1829).

The European “Great Powers” (England, France, Belgium, Holland, Russia, and Bavaria) did not want to get directly involved in this Ottoman War, but they provided a great deal of indirect and not-so-indirect support to the so-called Greek “freedom fighters”. In fact, a number of university students from England,

<sup>44</sup> See Russell Chamberlin, *Loot! The Heritage of Plunder* (London 1983) 39–65, 123–148; and *Napoleon in Egypt: Al-Jabarti's Chronicle of the French Occupation, 1798*. Translated by Shmuel Moreh and introduced by Robert L. Tignor (Princeton 1993); note Edward W. Said's “Afterword” to the volume, 169–180.

<sup>45</sup> See Roberts, *Jerusalem and the Holy Land Rediscovered: The Prints of David Roberts (1796–1864)* (Durham 1997). One of the most interesting of these accounts, told from the perspective of this self-styled “imperial gaze”, is William Kinglake's *Eothen* (Marlboro 1992 [1844]). For an ironic play on much the same journey, and that same imperial style, see Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad, or, The New Pilgrim's Progress* (New York 1967 [1869]). Another excellent North American example is John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land* (New York 1996 [1837]).

<sup>46</sup> The best review of Schliemann's work at Troy, both its quality of self-dramatization as well as its real scholarly contribution is Moses I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, Revised Edition (New York 1965) 159–177. For Schliemann's own reportage, see *Troy and Its Remains: A Narrative of Researches and Discoveries Made on the Site of Ilium and in the Trojan Plain*. Edited by Philip Smith (New York 1994 [1875]). For the more critical revisionist account, see David A. Traill, *Schliemann at Troy: Treasure and Deceit* (New York 1995).

<sup>47</sup> See Eliza M. Butler's idiosyncratic, but suggestive, discussion of this point, *The Tyranny of Greece Over Germany: A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry Over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Centuries* (Boston 1935), as well as the excellent contemporary review by Stephen Spender, *The Criterion* XV:59 (January 1936) 295–298. For a still more impressive treatment of the totality of Germanic Hellenism, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down From Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970* (Princeton 1996).

France, the German-speaking regions, and the United States went off to fight in the War on their own. Lord Byron popularized that trip, and this political commitment, for many Romantics.<sup>48</sup> He, of course, died in Greece in 1824. Others who stayed at home collected funds and created several Greek "fraternities" as expressions of solidarity with these self-styled "freedom fighters".<sup>49</sup> This is when that mysterious "Office of Greek Affairs" was invented, so it would seem.

And now we begin to see the contours of our own Greek Revival more clearly. Europeans began traveling to Greece in significant numbers in the 1700s. Most of them wrote about the antiquities, now in ruins, establishing that grand Romantic trope of a Grecian marble fragment cloaked in a wooded glen. In the early 1800s, the Greek War of Independence put Greece on the map, literally and figuratively, all over again. "Greek Affairs" became an evermore significant force in the lives of North American colleges, and of the broader intellectual culture.

So much for the roots of our Hellenic Revival. But what work did these European intellectuals ask the Greeks to do for them? I suspect that they were asking the Greeks to do some significant *spiritual* work. A great many European intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries believed that the grand Judaeo-Christian synthesis of culture and religion – much of it attributable to Charlemagne – in northern Europe was dying. Their reactions to this perceived "death of God" (which Hegel described fully seventy years before Nietzsche, incidentally) were two-fold. Some were deeply troubled, and looked to other spiritual traditions which, they hoped, might breath new life into the decaying spiritual traditions of Christian Europe. India, Egypt, Israel and Greece were all places steeped in a sort of history that was perceived to be of some potential assistance here. But Greece emerged in the nineteenth century as the literal *locus classicus* for most such spiritual endeavors. The Modern Olympic Revival of 1894 was explicitly described in this fashion by its founder, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin – as a *religio athletae*.<sup>50</sup> The Modern Olympics illustrate one way in which "the Greeks" could be used – to help heal the alleged spiritual malaise in Europe.

Others were delighted by this alleged "death of God" – and here Nietzsche is representative of an entire school of thought – men and women who believed that the death of the Christian God was a good riddance. They turned to some of these more exotic, "eastern" traditions in order precisely to escape from the spiritual

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Minta, *On A Voiceless Shore: Byron in Greece* (New York 1998).

<sup>49</sup> For the North American perspective on these and other matters, see Stephen Larrabee, *Hellas Observed: The American Experience of Greece, 1775–1865* (New York 1957), as well as Peter Singer, "American Philhellenes and the Greek War of Independence", *Paralos: A Journey Into Hellenism* 2 (Princeton 1996) 51–54. See also Paul C. Pappas, *The United States and the Greek War for Independence, 1821–1828* (New York 1985) and C.M. Woodhouse, *The Philhellenes* (Teaneck, 1969).

<sup>50</sup> See my "The Ethos of Olympism: The Religious Significance of the Modern Olympic Movement", *Soundings* 80.4 (1997) 1000–1036.

yoke of Protestant Judaeo-Christianity. Such people, by contrast, were attracted to Hinduism, or to ancient Egyptian religion, as well as to the ancient Greeks, precisely because they were so very un-Christian. The renewed interest in ancient Israelite religion was motivated by much the same spiritual hunger. Un-Christian or anti-Christian, it was an attempt to reclaim the non-scriptural, non-literate spirituality one meets in the biblical book of Judges, not to mention in most of the other religions of antiquity, as we have seen. It was this essential religious different-ness that was one key source of their cultural attraction.

In the eighteenth century, it seems to me that the jury was still out: that India, or Egypt, or Greece might have served as the focal point for this Romantic Revival. By the early nineteenth century, the Greeks had won this contest. To be sure, Indologists and Egyptologists had secured themselves a place in the modern European university – as religionists and as art historians, primarily. The academic study of Stone Age and Bronze Age civilization was left to the Archaeologists and Comparative Religionists as well.

But *Greek Studies* became a course of its own, in the university curricula that were reorganized at the University of Berlin, and elsewhere, in the first several decades of the nineteenth century. For whatever constellation of reasons – and they were many – there were destined to be *Greek* fraternities at EuroAmerican universities, and not Egyptian or Indian fraternities (discounting the fascinating phenomenon of the Masonic Lodge, for now, with its own intriguing mingling of Pythagorean numbers mysticism and an Egyptian cult of eternity). The Office of Greek Affairs had been born, armed with a Romantic myth of ancient origins, a sense of the glory that had been once, and might yet be again.

### Romanticism

What I am suggesting is, again, simpler than it may sound. Our Hellenic Revival, the one we may be living at the end of, was largely a *Romantic* revival. The vision of “the Greeks” we have inherited is “Romantic” – in our fraternities *and* in our curriculum. And the work we have asked the Greeks to do for us is subtly *spiritual* work, the work the Romantics felt the most need of. Admittedly, “Romantic” is one of those complicated and overdetermined terms that means many different things to many different people. It means subtly different things in the realms of philosophy,<sup>51</sup> literature,<sup>52</sup> and the plastic arts. Romanticism charted out subtly different trajectories in England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and in the United States.<sup>53</sup> It is probably not a term that can be easily or pithily defined at

<sup>51</sup> See Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (New York 1997).

<sup>52</sup> One of the best scholars of Romanticism in the previous generation is Owen Barfield; see his *Romanticism Comes of Age* (Middletown 1966) for a sensitive description of the spiritual dimension of the movement.

<sup>53</sup> See Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Cambridge, MA 1994) which helpfully devotes one chapter to each country, excepting the U.S.A.

all.<sup>54</sup> But this much we can say: Romanticism was a coherent response to the perceived challenges of "modern" life – industrial, intellectual and spiritual – and the Romantics came to see in ancient Greece, albeit a Greece that they themselves created and mythologized, significant and inescapable resources for the making of modern sorts of meaning. Minimally, we can say this much: we owe our own taxonomy of "the ancients and the moderns" to the Romantic Movement, and we continue to speak as "Romantics" whenever we invoke it.

When we today pose the question – "Why the Greeks?" – what we are implicitly saying is that we find the traditional *Romantic* answers to this question inadequate. But why? What *were* the Romantic answers to the question? Romanticism was never univocal on this or on any other matter. But one popular answer was Keats', discovered, so he says, in 1820 or so, while meditating on the remains of a Grecian Urn:

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.<sup>55</sup>

That sounds a bit "romantic", in the bad sense, to most contemporary ears. The Romantic sonnets that wax so nostalgic for "the glory that was Greece" seem to suggest that it – Greece, and especially Athens, in the space of a single sacred century – was "the greatest culture on earth". We have grown appropriately sensitive to the misleading quality of such rhetoric, the dangerous assumption that cultural "greatness" can be measured or quantified this way, and that there exists a single ruler for measuring it: a Greek ruler, a metron.

I also worry a great deal about nostalgia, as a political or philosophical argument for much of anything at all – least of all for the Classics.<sup>56</sup> But that is where we stand, today, in my judgment. We are heir to certain Romantic assumptions about the Greeks and their importance for us. And we have come to find *some* of these assumptions, at best questionable, and at their worst, positively misleading and even dangerous.

What I have been trying to suggest is that this question – "Why the Greeks?" – for those of us who continue to drink deeply at the Greek well, is less of a

<sup>54</sup>The best single text that I know of for describing these vast cultural, and neoHellenic, developments does not explicitly discuss Romanticism at all. It is Charles Sprawson's *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer As Hero* (New York 1992). Sprawson undertakes an impressive cultural history of the phenomenon of European recreational swimming. He roots the practices in British imperialism, as well as in the cult of Lord Byron, whose crossing of the Hellespont became such an important trope for subsequent generations. Sprawson admits the full importance of Byron as a self-created mythic figure, and he helpfully points to the persistence of the Greeks – most notably and oddly, Pindar – in all of these varied European cultural pursuits.

<sup>55</sup>John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn", *The Works of John Keats* (London 1994) 233–234.

<sup>56</sup>This is the central thesis of my *Afterwords: Hellenism, Modernism and the Myth of Decadence* (Albany, NY 1996).

challenge than an opportunity. It is an invitation to answer the question in ways more attuned to what we today believe and value, and that to which we aspire. It is *not* a hostile question – at least it shouldn't be – but rather an appeal for assistance and clarification. If the so-called "Classical tradition" is no longer important for strictly *Romantic* reasons, then what *other* reasons may be offered in its defense?

Too often, these debates and polemics are couched in absolute terms: "Romanticism" is what is wrong with the contemporary curriculum, and must be abandoned *tout court*. Such bald pronouncements are ultimately self-subverting. I do not believe that we are done with the nineteenth century, despite how eagerly many intellectuals may wish to be free of its dubious legacy: imperialism, racism, colonialism, and yes, Romanticism, too. If there is any truth to the oft-held contention that "the modern research university" has its roots in the University of Berlin, which was organized under the direction of Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1809 and 1810,<sup>57</sup> then *all* of our academic traditions are Romantic ones. The University of Berlin was organized on elegant Romantic premises: as a response to a perceived cultural and spiritual crisis; as a curricular attempt to detach Christian Theology from other speculative endeavors like Philosophy and Comparative Religion; as a venue for the simultaneous creation of and valorization of the fledgling "Classical" disciplines of *Philologie* and *Altertumswissenschaft*; as a place in which the dominant metaphors were architectural, suggesting that a curriculum ought to be a single coherent structure, in which a certain course of study – either Philosophy or Classics – served as the "capstone". My point is that we have jettisoned, or else significantly nuanced, some of these assumptions. But others are still alive and well, still very much with us. We revel in Art and the genius of the Artist (the capitalizations are themselves instructive); we aspire to the special preciousness in the cultivation of the individual voice. These are also indelibly Romantic labors. Our task, then, is not to settle the vexing question of whether or not to sign on with the Romantics across the board. Rather, we are engaged in the much more complex, and infinitely more enriching attempt to say what it is in these Romantic traditions that we can still embrace and admire, as well as where we have moved rather far from their assumptions about educational virtue and pedagogical value. The debate about "the Greeks" lies at the epicenter of this vast seismic complex of curricular collegiate forces. "Romanticism", then, is not a task with which we will ever simply be done, anymore than "modernity" itself is.

### Modern Hellenisms

Where, then, should we go from here? Where *are* we going? The intellectual terrain before me is vast, and I can do little more here than survey it briefly and tentatively. It is clear enough that there *are* answers to the question – "Why the

<sup>57</sup> See Daniel Fallon, *The German University: A Heroic Ideal in Conflict with the Modern World* (Colorado 1980).



Greeks?" – answers that are *not* so tied to Romantic assumptions about the Greeks' cultural superiority, their outrageous sole ownership of "truth and beauty," or what have you. The Athenian "renaissance" of the Fifth Century BCE has traditionally been remembered as a defining Hellenic moment in three distinct areas: in Literature, in the Plastic Arts, and in Philosophy. Various Hellenic Revivals have resuscitated one or another of these extraordinary Athenian innovations, but no culture to my knowledge has attempted to work in all of these areas at once, anymore than it has attempted to recreate the Greeks out of whole cloth. Cultural revivals are never so baldly imitative as that. Most of the revivalism that I have been tracking has been literary and philosophical. That is probably indicative of my own interests as much as anything else. The only real connection to the Plastic Arts that I might have discussed – the Florentine – I elected to leave largely unaddressed. This is because I assume that Classical connections, say, in north Italian sculpture and painting, are clear enough, whereas the Platonic renaissance in Tuscany and its vital rootedness in Byzantine intellectual life are less well known and less well documented in the contemporary west. As we today cast about for other, non-Romantic, methods for making the Greeks speak to our own cultural condition, and for teaching our own times to speak in a more distinctively Greek dialect, I have noticed advances in several areas that have not been so prominent before – notably, Architecture and Political Theory. As for Literature, which I will also discuss briefly, Homer and the Attic tragedians are perennial, one of the most constant stars in the stunning neoHellenic constellation. Today, as always, creative cultural synthesizers are in dialogue, and in competition, with the Homeric and Sophoclean legacy. Let me survey some of this terrain, very briefly, here at the end. In each of these three areas, one notes the attempt to address coherently the question I initially posed here: *Why the Greeks?* One finds intriguingly different and really exciting answers to the question in each of these arenas – in Architecture, Politics, and Literature.

### Architecture

Architecture has recently become a real growth area for contemporary philosophers and cultural students. Now, the influence of subtly Greek architectural forms on European architecture is clear enough – again, in certain periods and in certain places. The style we call "Neo-Classical"<sup>58</sup> seems to have intended two different sorts of effects. In Europe, and especially in France, the NeoClassical Greek Revival in architecture was intended as a rejection of the excessive decorativeness and the perceived decadence of the Rococo style.

On the far side of the Atlantic, however, the architectural appeal to Greek models made a more deliberately *political* statement. Much of our so-called "Federalist" architecture was initially more Romano-Italic than it was Greek. The

<sup>58</sup> See Andreas Papadakis and Harriet Watson (eds.), *New Classicism: Omnibus Volume* (New York 1990).

White House, originally designed in 1792, was done in the "Palladian" style, intended to recall the Venetian Renaissance as much as anything else. Jefferson's "Monticello" is an even more pertinent example of this architectural nod to the Venetian renaissance. Early in the nineteenth century, and after the British destruction of the nascent capitol in 1812, a popular international contest was held, soliciting designs for the proposed "capitol building." Debate centered on the style that might best make the architectural statement the founders wanted. Tellingly, the design that was triumphant was the very domed structure that has had such an impact on subsequent political architecture throughout the country – from state capitol buildings to town halls.<sup>59</sup> The dome – that triumph of Roman, not Greek, engineering – was intended to point to our political self-understanding, namely, that we were a Republic, not a Democracy,<sup>60</sup> modelled on the classical Roman idea of the balance of competing political powers, not the allegedly harmonious ideal of Greek democracy at all.<sup>61</sup>

Then, toward the end of the nineteenth century, something changed quite dramatically. I have already noted the ways in which Romanticism effected essential cultural transformations, especially the taste for Greek things. The 1893 Worlds Fair in Chicago, with its fabled "White City",<sup>62</sup> had an enormous impact at the time. What one finds subsequent to this World's Fair, in any case, is a spate of new building in the nation's capitol, all of it now suddenly and explicitly Greek-leaning. The Lincoln Memorial, whose inscription names it explicitly as a "temple", was designed by Henry Bacon and John Russell Pope and constructed between 1911 and 1922.<sup>63</sup> It bears the customary linear, columniated facade that is emblematic of the style. The United States Supreme Court building, designed by Cass Gilbert and completed in 1935, is explicitly modelled on the Athenian Parthenon, replete with pedimental sculptural groups boasting Solon, and Confucius, and Moses on one side, and the goddess of Liberty on the other.<sup>64</sup> This

<sup>59</sup> See Pamela Scott, *Temple of Liberty: Building the Capitol for a New Nation* (New York 1995).

<sup>60</sup> See James Madison, Federalist Number 10, as well as the comments made by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. Translated by Phillips Bradley (New York 1945) 1,433–439.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Murphy has provocatively pointed out a "missing piece" in this intellectual and cultural jigsaw. There is another period of "Greek Revival" in the US in the 1840s, well after the Greek War for Independence, and confined largely to domestic and commercial, not public, architecture. Murphy suggests that this may be linked to Jacksonian, not Jeffersonian, ideals of republicanism. We were not yet referring to ourselves as "a democracy of laws", but rather were thought to be "a democracy of access" – access to private lands. The frontier therefore defined this democratic sensibility, just as surely as the court would come to symbolize the attainments of a subsequent age.

<sup>62</sup> See Stanley Appelbaum, *The Chicago World's Fair of 1893: A Photographic Record With Text* (New York 1980).

<sup>63</sup> Pamela Scott and Antoinette J. Lee, *Buildings in the District of Columbia* (New York 1993) 82–83, 103–104.

<sup>64</sup> See Paul A. Freund (ed.), *History of the Supreme Court of the United States* (New York 1981), and Kermit L. Hall, *The Oxford Companion to the U.S. Supreme Court* (New York 1992) 43–46.

newer architectural form – a Greek temple forming the facade to a much larger and more ornamental structure – was extremely popular; one meets it literally everywhere, from local banks to private homes built in this period.

At the Supreme Court itself, however, the style seems to have had something more consciously to do with a changing American self-understanding, the new-found aspiration to be, not merely a republic (and thus presumably fraught with the distinctively *Roman* problems of faction and the hybriatic imperial temptation embodied in large, standing armies), but rather to be “a democracy of laws”. That essential spirit of democratic litigiousness, set in stone in buildings such as this one, is alive and well and shows no sign of abatement in our own time.

The High Court was modeled on a Greek temple. We do not think nearly enough about the irony of the presence of this explicitly religious architecture and religious artwork in the nation’s central shrine dedicated to the sacrosanct principle of “the *separation* of church and state”. Hellenism, as we saw in medieval Spain, is often lauded as the very thing that can help hold various and competing religious communities together. Hellenism, that is to say, may be a functional religion that is not remembered as a religion at all. That is perhaps one reason why we can build “temples” to the Hellenic cause in the nation’s capitol.

Now, it may seem that this “Greek revival” in architecture is definitely over. Yet, here as elsewhere, the Greeks are always a long time dying. The style that somewhat pretentiously calls itself “post-modern” claims to be *beyond* a “modern” style that understood itself to have nothing at all to do with the Greeks. The “modern” architecture at stake here is best embodied in the glass-and-steel box or skyscraper. What one sees in a great deal of “post-modern” architecture is the attempt to lay hold of and manipulate certain classical forms in the creation of distinctly contemporary architectural effects. In particular, one notes with real interest the sudden re-emergence of the *column* as a singularly potent architectural punctuation point.<sup>65</sup>

### Politics

It is in the political arena that one notices some of the most intensive resurgence of interest in Greek things. This may seem ironic, given how factional and disruptive Greek politics tended to be in its own heyday. Here, once again, Nietzsche is a premonition. Nietzsche spoke eloquently about the excessive *agonism*, the almost obsessive competitiveness, of the ancient Greeks. He marveled at the way the Greeks built conflict into the very essence of their political process. We see it in their athletics, in their politics, in the way they waged war, in

<sup>65</sup> See Joseph Rykwert’s extraordinary book, *The Dancing Column: On Form in Architecture* (Cambridge, MA 1995) that uses Vitruvius’ analysis of the Greek orders of architecture to display these movements wonderfully, by paying particular attention to the way that the humanistic ideal of the Greek column (which is, however vaguely, always a human form) has been used and re-used architecturally in this century.

the theater, virtually everywhere. Nietzsche envisioned a newer, more agonistic kind of Classical Studies as better suited to its material.

Now, the Romantic view of the Greek *polis* suggested that it was a seamless world without conflict – Keats' vision of the harmonious coexistence of truth, goodness and beauty, again. This fiction allegedly ruled there, in Athens, not faction. Here again, the more contemporary insight is couched in terms of a quarrel with Romanticism. The fact of the matter is that the Greek *polis* was riddled with conflict, but the Greeks attempted to build this agonism *into* the political process itself. They did not shy away from conflict so much as they attempted to ritualize and regulate it – with, admittedly, mixed results. A number of contemporary political theorists have commented on the wisdom of this political model. If we do not have Agonism, they note, then we will have Antagonism, a Greek word which literally means “instead of agonism” – one or the other. The Modern Olympic Revival, which I have mentioned before, was an attempt to ritualize that insight internationally – in the hopes that, by competing against one another athletically, we would wage war less often. It involves, not the naive dream of a world without conflict, but rather a world in which conflicts have been molded and steered in certain avenues. (This is very much like Adam Smith's argument for the virtue of Capitalism, incidentally, and it is still one of the most visible contemporary arguments for something called “democracy” worldwide). Pierre de Coubertin insisted, in any event, that his Modern Olympic Revival was a piece of politics and of pedagogy, not of athletics alone.

More recently, scholars like Peter Euben<sup>66</sup> have suggested that the real genius of Athenian Democracy lay in its very radicalism. “Radical democracy”, as Euben defines the idea, was organized around the sacred principle that most of the business of the *polis* can be done, and must be done, by *everyone*. We seldom remember, Euben notes, just how many political jobs in Athens were assigned by lot. Socrates himself served in this capacity, notoriously so. The implication is clear: everyone can, and everyone must, do “the political thing”. If you live in the *polis*, then you must work for it. In an age of professional politicians, increasing hostility to the profession of politics itself and the bureaucratization of its institutions (from the ATF to the IRS), and in the wake of urgent debates about “campaign finance reform,” this is perhaps an enduring insight from the Greek world that is especially relevant to our own time and its cynicism about the unprincipled contentiousness of contemporary politics.

<sup>66</sup> See Peter Euben, John R. Wallach and Josiah Ober (eds.), *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (Ithaca 1994), as well as Euben's own *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton 1990). Two other excellent resources are Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Power of the People* (Princeton 1989) and Moses I. Finley's little volume, *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (New Brunswick 1972).

## Literature

But it is in the realm of literature that some of the most suggestive answers to my initial question may be found.<sup>67</sup> The work of Derek Walcott, the St. Lucian poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, is an extraordinary example of the Hellenic's enduring appeal. In his epic poem, *Omeros*,<sup>68</sup> Walcott managed to translate the Homeric world of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into a lovely and compelling Antillean *patois*. The Aegean blends with the Caribbean in this sing-song tale of western colonialism, exoticism, and, yes, multi-culturalism. Through it all, Walcott coyly refuses to tell us exactly what he is doing, exactly why these old Homeric images still resonate as they so clearly do. Walcott notices, in his Nobel Lecture,<sup>69</sup> that Europeans seem not to believe that people who live in warm weather can be "serious", seem not really to think that they can have a "culture". Walcott worries about the ways in which island-paradises become nothing more than playgrounds for elite European tourists, all of whose "cultural" monuments live elsewhere, in European theatres and museums. It has happened in the Caribbean, he cautions. It has happened in Modern Greece as well. As an English-speaking member of the West African diaspora in the New World, Walcott has inherited the Classics in much the same way that he has inherited the English language – from his schooling. He speaks eloquently of this artistic double-mindedness as well in his Nobel Lecture, where he refers to such "*fragments of epic memory*". This image, of the fragment, has been preeminently with us since the Romantics.<sup>70</sup>

Yet one senses that it is more than this, that it has something to do with the enduring Homeric tropes of exile and of homecoming, the vast poetic image of the sea itself. Since receiving the Nobel Prize, in any case, Derek Walcott has continued to drink deeply at the Homeric well, bringing forth a stunning dramatic version of *The Odyssey*<sup>71</sup> in the following year. Walcott is very much like Seamus Heaney, another recent Nobel Laureate, in this endeavor. Heaney produced a new translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, and renamed it *The Cure At Troy*,<sup>72</sup> shortly before receiving his Prize in 1995. Indeed, there have been no fewer than twelve major adaptations of Classical Athenian drama by eight contemporary Irish poets in the past decade alone.<sup>73</sup> Yet Heaney chose to publish the play without includ-

<sup>67</sup> I have made most of these same points in Ruprecht (*supra* n. 1) 256–257.

<sup>68</sup> Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York 1990). A special volume of *South Atlantic Quarterly* ("The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives," edited by Gregson Davis, Spring 1997) was recently devoted to Walcott's work, and especially to its fascinating non-Romantic, neoHellenic connections.

<sup>69</sup> See Walcott's *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory* (New York 1992) 12–15.

<sup>70</sup> See Stephen A. Larrabee, *English Bards and Grecian Marbles: The Relationship Between Sculpture and Poetry Especially in the Romantic Period* (New York 1943).

<sup>71</sup> Tellingly enough, not based on the *Iliad*, this version was designed for the stage on a commission from the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. See Walcott, *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (New York 1993).

<sup>72</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (New York 1994).

<sup>73</sup> See Marianne McDonald, "Violent Words: Brian Friel's Living Quarters: After Hippolytus," in *Arion* Third Series 6.1 (1998) 35–47.

ing so much as a single page Translator's Preface. This deafening silence with regard to what these poets think they are doing speaks volumes. Hellenism, as I have said many times now, cannot be theorized and it cannot be argued for. It can, however, be elegantly and eloquently *displayed*. Perhaps "the Greeks" are at heart a matter for performative recreation – in theaters, in political forums, in the courtroom – for mimetic recreation – in philosophy – and also for display – in museums and in architecture. "The Greeks" are not a fictional entity whose continued place among us can be theoretically defended – perhaps *that* is the great Romantic myth that we ought to be about dismantling. It is heartening to see several Nobel Laureates wizened to these altogether essential strategic points.

The best way to answer the question – "Why the Greeks?" – is, ironically enough, not to try to answer it at all, least of all theoretically. One should "strive to live classically", as Nietzsche puts it, rather than to hide behind a wall of classical scholarship. "It would be a shame", he quipped, "if the Classics spoke less clearly to us because a million words got in the way."<sup>74</sup>

### Afterword

As my Freshman year in college unfolded, I learned a great deal about "Greek Affairs". I learned what fraternities were, and a little more about the purposes they served. I opted not to join one, myself, although I was tempted to do so. Instead, I found myself happily preoccupied with a year-long sequence of courses in the Classics department: "Greek Civilization", and then "Roman Civilization". In these courses, I found important and enduring resources, a vocabulary that helped me to name important aspirations that I perceived within myself, as well as other aspirations it had not occurred to me to desire before.

It would be the rankest arrogance for me, or for anyone else, to assume that this same story – the story of my Freshman year – is mine alone, that it is not being recapitulated today by other students, at other colleges. And it is precisely because I believe this to be the case that I find myself unable to work up the kind of emotion, and commotion, that is supposed to attach to this vexing and perplexing question: *Why the Greeks?* It is not that there is no answer to the question. There are *countless* answers to this question. And none of them are best captured theoretically. The display, like the readiness, is all.

<sup>74</sup>Nietzsche, *Wir Philologen* 3[31]; Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (eds.), *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke* VIII, 23.

# The Greeks: The Political Revolution in World History

*Christian Meier*

The question to be discussed here is mostly posed in retrospect. One then asks: What have the Greeks given us? The title of a book first published in 1921 and rewritten by new authors in 1981, *The Legacy of Greece*, is particularly indicative of this dominant interest. The Greeks did, in innumerable fields, pave the way for the Occident; the Occident has returned to them, again and again, and is still doing so. In a general sense, this is a commonplace, but the details are problematic. It is not at all easy to determine in a more precise way the direct and indirect contribution of the Greeks to Roman, medieval and modern history.

But this is not my theme. Here the question relates to the beginning of Greek history: How did Greek culture emerge? And this question should not be taken lightly. We cannot assume that the Greeks were a particularly gifted people. As far as we know, the notion of gift belongs to individual psychology. If whole peoples seem to be gifted, this can only mean that they had particular possibilities to develop the gifts present among them as among others. And these possibilities cannot, in turn, be derived from specific collective characteristics; they must be explained together with those characteristics. However ready we may be to credit the Greeks with all manners of excellence, we must admit that the reasons for doing so need explanation and do not explain anything by themselves. We are still far from having satisfactory answers to the question about the origins of Greek culture. Historical research on classical antiquity has not done much to help us, and modern theories of evolution are of no use.

Above all, such theories miss two decisive points: The totally exceptional character of the Greeks in relation to all other cultures, including the so-called axial civilizations, and consequently, the fact that democracy and the political in a specific sense developed only among the Greeks. In my opinion, the fashionable underestimation of the political and of democracy is dangerous (it is also, in a disquieting sense, distinctively German). But it is particularly misguided when it comes to the interpretation of universal history. With all due respect for social history, relations of production and property rights: The decisive moment of world history between the early civilizations and the Christian West was a political one, namely the emergence of the political among the Greeks. Perhaps we should, by analogy with the neolithic revolution, speak of a world-historical political revolution, brought about by the Greeks. And with all due respect for structural history: This very moment belongs to the history of events from the viewpoint of universal history, it was highly contingent.

A first tentative observation can be made without detailed study or scholarly knowledge: Civilizations interdependent or, in the most crucial cases, indepen-

dent of each other took shape in various parts of Asia, Africa and America. With the exception of Greek civilization, they were all characterized by the central role of monarchy in the sociogenetic process. There is much to be said about the challenges which the monarch faced and which enabled him to innovate. We should also remember the role of priesthoods, temples and mythologies; and it may be possible to identify common features of mutually independent civilizations, which would suggest some law-like patterns of development. Here we must leave all these things aside, as well as many others. The decisive point is, in my opinion, that a monarch stood at the center of all these cultures, and that he together with his apparatuses and other (especially priestly) authorities constructed a system whose functioning and preservation continued to be bound to the monarchy. It could be usurped or destroyed, but there was no positive alternative to monarchy. Everything was dependent on and oriented towards it, not least in many cases the maintenance and protection of numerous technical preconditions of these cultures. There was, in other words, a very far-reaching and stable concentration of power, wealth, knowledge, and capacity to act in one single place. In such cases, we can to a much greater extent than in regard to the Greeks observe a process of "state" formation, however different the result may still be from the modern state.

The civilizational achievements of these cultures were often of a very high order, and in many respects significantly superior to the Greeks. Important "learning processes" could take place. But inasmuch as all learning is also unlearning (to learn is to perceive, or to take seriously, certain possibilities within a broader range, and to neglect the others), all acts of learning in these cultures were adapted to or confined within the basic monarchic structure. And alternatives to it were unlearned.

By contrast, monarchs played only a marginal role in Greek history. The sociogenetic processes unfolded from within society. Before the Hellenistic phase, there was no stable and dominant concentration of power, wealth, knowledge and capacity to act in the hands of single individuals. The examples of the tyrants who at a later stage and only in some cities temporarily monopolized power and the capacity to act, also shows how difficult it was to extend the monopoly to knowledge, and to create the legitimacy needed to stabilize a new monarchy.

There is no point in asking whether or to what extent this was a cause or consequence of the process that led to the emergence of democracy. As with the question of the chicken and the egg, a closer examination must focus on the process that gave rise to both things. In any case, this "shortcoming" of the Greeks was, from a certain point in time onwards, decisive for the whole sociogenetic context not as a cause, but as a precondition. This aspect – the different distribution of power and knowledge, as well as of wealth and of individual capacity to act – was essential to the development of political forms, the specific Greek modes of thought and creation, and the position of the Greeks in the world. The results affected the whole subsequent course of history.

With regard to both starting-point and outcomes, the Greeks are thus the great



exception among major civilizations. And if we can reasonably assume that their influence on Rome and Christianity, on medieval and modern Europe, and on the whole modern world was decisive, we may see the Greeks as a needle's eye through which world history had to pass in order to reach the stage of European and worldwide modernity. Obviously, this presupposes that Rome and Christianity as well as the medieval and modern worlds could only become what they were on the basis of Greek inputs. The crucial contributions may be due to the level of rationality reached by the Greeks, or the impact of Aristotelian concepts revived in the medieval West by Thomas Aquinas; to the idea of humanity, developed by the Romans but inconceivable without the Greeks; or to the notions of democracy, freedom, equality and citizenship, which had to be invented before they could be implemented on the enlarged scale of the West. Greek myth and Greek plastic arts (or the Roman art strongly influenced by the Greeks) must also be considered. And it seems likely that the foundation of the modern state, together with its demarcation from the church and thus also the momentous separation of state and society was only made possible by the use of philosophical concepts and perspectives inherited from the Greeks.

But one can only speculate about these things. I do not see how we could arrive at more precise conclusions: for we cannot isolate the Greek elements that were involved in successive turns of history, and then to analyze the remaining factors. And we don't know enough about the possibilities of evolution.

In short, we must rest content with a historian's observation: whatever might otherwise have happened, the actual course of events was in any case strongly affected by Greek culture and can only be understood in relation to it.

But what led to the rise of this culture and the creation of the legacy that it left to all later generations? To use a problematic term: what was the pattern of Greek evolution? Here, too, we seem to be faced with uncertain facts and insoluble problems. The sources are extremely unsatisfactory, and there will be no major change for the better; archaeological findings the only ones that can be expected to increase are on the whole of limited significance.

Even so, there are deficits of research that can be made good. It seems likely that even the meager available sources could directly or indirectly be used to back up insights that have yet to be formulated. On the one hand, the question of the origins of Greek culture has been neglected, because an exceptional capacity to create culture was taken for granted. On the other hand, the possibilities and necessities of interdisciplinary research in this field were not even properly perceived, let alone exhausted. Comparative research is underdeveloped. On closer examination, many features that have been seen as defining characteristics of the Greeks or invoked to explain their history can be found elsewhere. Early popular assemblies, often taken to mark the beginning of the road to democracy, are more or less known (i.e. can be concluded) to have existed in Mesopotamia as well as in India and Iran, although subsequent developments did not follow the same path. Apparent peculiarities of the Homeric poems are characteristic of early heroic epics in general. There are, of course, other features that remain distinctively Homeric or Greek. But only comparative research can tell us exactly

what they are and what they mean. As for the numerous parallels between Chinese and Greek or Jewish and Greek history, we can only note them in passing.

But comparative research is not only an antidote to misconceptions about the particular characteristics of peoples studied by specialized historians. It can also generate new insights of its own. However, it is not enough for results in one field to be appropriated by scholars in another, or by theorists of evolution (although that would already be of some use). It is often the case that these results reflect very specific questions, which in turn presuppose the horizon of a particular discipline. They are therefore often unable to provide answers to questions coming from elsewhere, even if the sources themselves are conducive to such answers. What we need is a cooperative, mutually participatory effort to confront problems, develop questions, and to acquire knowledge of possible connections, factors and constellations. That might make the sources more amenable to further interpretations. Such a framework for more systematic questioning would both allow us to link the sources more effectively to available knowledge and tell us more precisely what we do not know.

If we can give a clearer account of contrasts and convergences in the results of different lines of development, it should be possible to draw conclusions about the specific preconditions and motive powers at work in each case. But then we also have to search for counter-examples and see realities within the horizon of possibilities. The question is not only why something happened as it did, but also why it did not happen in another way. Every analysis of connections seemingly conducive to development must be accompanied by a survey of other cases where similar connections may have prevailed without causing any comparable changes. In the case of certain cultures that flourished during the last millennium BC (Karl Jaspers's "axial period"), a marginal position with regard to older cultures and stronger powers seems to have been of some importance. That applies, in particular, to the Greeks and to Ancient Israel. But before drawing any general conclusions about the significance of such marginality, we should consider counter-examples; this might show that only a particular kind of marginality, or a combination with (or absence of) other factors made this situation so favorable. Marginality may only be a particular case of a more general constellation: if the early development of autonomous intellectuals in Greece was linked to the marginal position and the multi-central character of a culture confined within narrow spatial bounds, the same development in China might be due to the size of the country and the plurality of strong centers. The debates on the origin and diversity of axial civilizations, organized by S.N. Eisenstadt, have shown how geopolitical hypotheses can be modified and refined by specialists working on Greece, Israel, India and China. Similar issues and hypotheses will emerge as the relevant disciplines draw closer to each other and begin to share not only results, but also ways of questioning, and to pose questions to each other.

But as long as no such interdisciplinary research gets off the ground, one can only formulate one's own questions, as precisely as possible, and try to communi-

cate the results. As we move from the preconditions and beginnings of the historical process, mere questions may give way to conjectures or even to conclusive findings. The overall picture will nevertheless remain unclear.

Archaeological sources suggest that the Greeks were from the beginning of the eighth century involved in significant and rapidly expanding trade in the Aegean area as well as in Syria and Italy. Colonization, which began a little later (around 750), then quickly led to the foundation of new cities on the various coasts of the Mediterranean. Until the end of the ninth century, the Greeks seem to have led a rather isolated life. In any case, the eighth century saw a relatively abrupt and many-sided outbreak of activity, including a significant increase in seafaring and shipbuilding (for the purposes of piracy as well as trade), and a much higher level of mobility. Many skills of different kinds must have been developed; new patterns of cooperation and rivalry emerged; new relationships too shape between individuals within small groups, between communities, and between the various groups and cities. Social differentiation went hand in hand with political change, new possibilities of gain and loss, and new occupations.

We do not know much more about the details. But it is on record or can be assumed that monarchic rule in the Greek communities was abolished or at least seriously weakened during the eight and early seventh centuries; sometimes the kings were confined to priestly roles. New forms of rule and new ways of balancing power were developed, and they were bound to affect the relationship between the nobility and the rest of the population.

/ Furthermore, the Greeks borrowed writing from the Phoenicians probably during the eighth century and adapted it to their language by introducing signs for the vowels that the Phoenicians had left unmarked.

Then, towards the end of the century, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed. Old epic songs, transmitted and enriched through generations, were combined with new parts in a systematic fashion, and probably written down at the same time. Greek written tradition thus begins with one of the masterpieces of world literature. And since so much of what counts as distinctively Greek can be found in Homer, we must ask ourselves whether the defining character of Greek culture had not taken shape at this very early stage before any marked increase in activity and mobility. But much may also be due to further elaboration at the beginning of the period of colonization. As Wolfgang Schadewaldt puts it: "The memories of a past age, together with a self-confident will to shape the future created a situation exceptionally favorable to poetry". He adds that "the spirit of the Delphic oracle was already at work".<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, many features commonly seen as Homeric are as noted above less characteristic of the Greeks in particular than of early epic poetry as such. There are stories about the heroes of an earlier and greater age. The heroes are endowed with exceptional strength and courage; they take pleasure in fighting, hunting and feasting; and they are committed to knightly ideals of honour. The stories claim to be true and contain realistic description of various details. Homer's distinctive language, liveliness and charm are another matter; so are his

<sup>1</sup> Cf. W. Schadewaldt, *Der Aufbau der Ilias* (Frankfurt/M 1975) 91 ff.

gods and many other things. But in view of the parallels with other cases, historians have to face the task of finding out what is specifically Homeric or specifically Greek about the Homeric poems. And even if many of the things involved seem distinctively Greek, it might be the case that the Greeks had then and later simply retained much of the freedom which epic poetry tends to ascribe to the remote past. For example, we might think that kings are portrayed in a way which suggests an easy path to democracy: their world, the world of public action, resembles that of unconstrained village life, and the concepts used to describe power show how weak its institutional foundations were. But if such an image of kingly authority is widespread in early epics, the characteristic trait of the Greeks would consist in the fact that their evolution preserved things which were elsewhere abolished for the sake of evolution, i.e. for the purpose of building strong monarchies. In that case, it would be misleading to see the Homeric world as marked by a particular "evolutionary openness"; rather, it would be a result of later developments that Homeric features remained present in Greek life. I do not think we are in a position to give a clear answer to this question.

It is also an open question whether Greek peculiarities as they had developed until the eighth century were in some way particularly favorable to changes in a democratic direction. This might be a matter of specific characteristics of the Dorian immigrants (although they may not have been very different from other Indo-Europeans), their relationship to the pre-existing population, particular forms of landed property, or particular forms of primitive popular assemblies as well as many other things.

Comparative study is the only way to arrive at any plausible conclusions about the beginnings of Greek development. If we can for example assume that the formation and consolidation of monarchy in other cultures led to the elimination of many "primitive" or "original" features, the real Greek enigma has less to do with the starting point than with the course of later history. In short, it is at least for the time being unclear how far the Greek road was determined by older precognitions or by the particular character of the "take-off".

The abrupt and enormous increase in Greek activity during the eighth century is probably due to population growth or, more precisely, to the fact that a growing population could no longer live on the land available at home. If increased demand for imports foods or iron play a role, this was probably for the same reason. In this situation there were roughly speaking two possibilities. Individual rulers or leaders could use the opportunities to accumulate power and embark on conquest or the surplus population could somehow be moved elsewhere. Whatever may have been attempted or in part achieved in some places, it was on the whole the second solution that prevailed. This may have something to do with structural conditions, such as the traditional weakness of monarchy in the area and the geographical obstacles to concentration of power. Seafaring was, in any case, an obvious outlet for the Greeks, and the interests of long-distance traders who wanted to establish outposts could easily combine with those of landless

peasants' sons who wanted to acquire their own farms; in addition, it was easy to found new cities in various parts of the Mediterranean. But it is not clear whether this was enough to divert surplus energies away from Greece, or whether more contingent combinations of motives, successes and expectations were needed to unleash the dynamic of colonization.

In any case, several factors combined to give an untypical direction to Greek development.

- I. The immigrants who destroyed Mycenaean society were not highly organized; they could not or would not appropriate the Mycenaean administrative apparatus, and in whatever shape they may have arrived, they dispersed into a multitude of small communities after the conquest.
- II. In the first centuries of the last millennium BC, a power vacuum in the Aegean area enabled the Greek communities to survive in isolation.
- III. When a more active society turned to expansion in the eighth century, the monarchic centers were on the whole so weak that they could not utilize the results to strengthen their own power basis.
- IV. An unusually large space for expansion, as well as a specific combination of motives, led the Greeks to export problems which might otherwise have led to the formation of stronger power centers and larger political units.
- V. It was obviously of some importance that the Greeks were not too close to and not too distant from the more advanced Oriental civilizations. They could thus avoid political dependence and at the same time appropriate goods, knowledge and most importantly new needs which inspired new activities; this complex of borrowings accelerated the historical process, and that made it even more difficult for individuals – monarchs or usurpers – to harness the whole dynamic to their particular purposes.

Under these circumstances, the results of increased activity and more rapid change were widely shared by many cities, as well as many individuals and families within them. All participated in the process and benefited from growing wealth, influence, fame and experience. The momentous developments of the few decades, which led to growing differentiation and expanding possibilities of action, were thus at the same time conducive to further stabilization of the original constellation: a relatively broad distribution of power and resources within the *poleis* and in the whole "poly-political" world of the Greeks.

The impact of particular characteristics of the Greek environment can only be understood within this context. It is true that the rugged landscape separated many small areas from each other; but this geographical factor does not seem to have prevented the political unification of relatively large areas during the Mycenaean epoch. And there can be no geographical explanation for the fact that many independent communities continued to coexist in small areas and on individual islands, whereas Athens was capable of unifying Attica and Sparta conquered the whole area of Messenia across the Taygetos. There were obviously more factors at work: the absence of a powerful neighbour like Minoan Crete, which seems to have been an external stimulus to the formation of large power blocs in the second millennium, the relative simplicity of Greek needs after the

destruction of Mycenaean culture, the weakness of political centers, and the outward direction of activity after the turning point of the eighth century. But there was also a positive factor, clearly strong but difficult to evaluate: the Greeks were very attached to the idea of living in very small, independent and transparent cities.

There were exceptions such as Attica and parts of the Argolis; there were the various synoecisms. The segregating trend was not absolute, but it was strong. Its logic is not easy to understand. Was it a result of the strong consciousness of belonging, characteristic of the Greek communities of cult and sacrifice? Or was this factor a product of later developments? If it was a survival from earlier times, the question is, how was it preserved? Survival could not be taken for granted. How important was a general human preference for managing one's own affairs, if there are no particular obstacles to that and no particular reasons for doing otherwise? Was this inclination at least strong enough to motivate resistance to the building of stronger power structures, and at the same time for the most part to preserve the unity and independence of those who lived together in one place? Was it of some significance that large political units were never needed, because the climatic and geographical conditions made it possible to do without them? And that colonization then channeled much of Greek activity outwards? Could it be the case that the condition of living together in small units was only later transformed into a strong will, and only because it had not been disrupted by any higher authorities, so that broader social strata could adopt it as a value of their own?

However that may be, the self-contained character and the relative independence of small communities, together with the versatility of the aristocracy and later on of broader social strata, were essential preconditions for the emergence of institutions compatible with freedom.

All these factors and many others mobilized the Greek world and broadened the scope of its activities, without imposing new constraints or giving rise to new powers capable of destroying the roots out of which freedom could revive. New possibilities, varying in kind and degree, were opened up not only for the aristocracy, but also especially through colonization to members of middle and lower strata.

It remains an open question whether we can with some justification single out individual factors as primary causes for the whole process; and it seems more likely that their contingent conjunction in successive situations was decisive for the early phase of Greek evolution.

Nor is it clear how easy the road to democracy was after these beginnings. The only obvious point to make is that the Greek world in general and its economic as well as political centers in particular drifted towards a major and probably inevitable crisis. Rising expectations seem to have gone beyond expanding possibilities, and this led to indebtedness, exploitation, debt slavery, misery and revolt. At the same time, the upward and downward mobility of many families caused unrest: major enterprises were risky and could lead to life-threatening losses as well as to massive gains. Other factors intensified the crisis.

There seems to have been a general loosening of bonds and a transformation of mentalities. Problems of foreign policy added to the difficulties. Innovations in weaponry and military tactics, as well as the growing involvement of middle strata in warfare, were of major importance. Colonization was no longer an effective outlet.

The crisis, which cannot be discussed in further detail here, began as an economic and social one, but it affected political and moral order. The result was a general loss of orientation, and a search for new foundations of individual and social life. The main issue was now: who would be able to find a way out of the crisis?

Tyranny prevailed in many places. Ambitious individuals of aristocratic origin managed to rally large numbers of discontented people. At the same time, they developed new methods of acting, accumulated capital, and invested in projects especially public building which created employment. In some cases they attracted foreign artisans, or improved the legal situation of lower strata. In short, they played a significant part in overcoming the economic crisis. Their rule was nevertheless short-lived; in most cases, they lacked the resources to extend their power beyond their own city. And they could not prevent the mainstream of Greek opinion from turning against tyranny and branding it as incompatible with just and good order. To sum up, the power of tyranny was in the context of the Greek world as a whole of limited importance and of a particularistic kind. This form of domination was, despite its achievements, a failure (even if it lasted longer in some places, for example in the Sicilian cities, where it fulfilled more important functions).

The failure of tyranny was partly due to the fact that a wholly new kind of power had emerged in Greece and this new power, early Greek political thought, drew further strength from the defeat of tyranny. It became central to the process that now unfolded towards the positive goal of more participation by broader strata.

To speak of political thought is not to suggest the kind of political theory developed later by the sophists or by Plato. Rather, the term refers to early reflections on the political life of the *polis*, its presuppositions and its context; such intellectual efforts were closely linked to practice and to existing realities without visible alternatives. This thought became more political as it learnt and taught others to respond more adequately to the problems of the *polis*. A learning process was, in other words, needed for people to become citizens and thereby members of the *polis* as a political community. In the long run, the politicization of the citizen and the democratization of the *polis* went hand in hand. The development of political thought was a specific and central but often underestimated part of the social-historical process that shaped the Greek world.

Our sources refer to seven wise men; this is probably a symbolic term for a larger group of people who lived in various parts of Greece during the archaic age and became known for giving advice on various matters. We are also told and it seems likely that they exchanged ideas, directed questions to each other and shared their experiences. They may have engaged in a kind of intellectual competition that reinforced the dynamic of a broader cultural process.

Further assumptions can be made on the basis of our knowledge of the power structures of the time. In contrast to other cultures, such as ancient Egypt, where intellectuals were subordinated to kings and priests and had to adjust their thought to that condition, no power capable of such control on a large scale emerged in Greece. Individual sages may have advised tyrants, and one of them became a tyrant. But since their advice was valued everywhere and on every side, they must have retained a certain independence. On the whole, they were less bound by ties to any power than by the obligations of an intellectual task.

If we take other sources into account, a more detailed picture can be reconstructed. Since the wise men were needed and proved competent, they acquired authority. In the cities, meanwhile, cases of political stalemate became more frequent; no powerful leaders could provide a solution (power was too difficult to concentrate, or there was no trust to build on), and it was therefore tempting to seek advice from a sage. He could be asked questions, or he could be commissioned to carry out tasks of a specific or general kind. Cities confronted with major crises empowered one of their own citizens or an outsider to implement reforms and restore order. This is known to have happened in several cases and must have happened more often. In this connection, we should also think of "law-finders", often appointed to record in writing the laws that had hitherto been transmitted orally and therefore open to arbitrary interpretation.

A very clear consciousness of problems must have developed; solutions were invented, remembered, compared and improved; various institutions were designed, and people learnt to think in institutional terms. Expectations rose in regard to intellectual crisis management, and they seem to have survived all failures.

These conclusions can be drawn from a wide range of references to the seven wise men, as well as to the Delphi oracle with which they were closely connected. Delphi appears to have been a kind of intellectual emporium, a center urgently needed by this world of many cities and therefore almost bound to emerge. In particular, its role during the colonization period enabled it to gather not only information on economic and geographical issues, but also knowledge about political techniques and problems, as well as ideas about the ultimate norms and needs of political life. Only a part of this knowledge was transmitted through oracles; much more must have found its way into conversations. Delphi may have made partisan decisions, and individual wise men may have sought direct political influence, popularity or remuneration. But it remains true that they could not have acquired their authority or at least not retained it for so long if they had not by and large been neutral towards the major powers of the time. They gave advice, not instruction. And they gave it to many sides; that was what earned them respect. They must on the whole have taken care to ensure that their advice was sound and useful, rather than adapting it to particular interests. At least, this attitude must have prevailed in the long run. Their gain – sometimes of a material kind – and their fame depended on intellectual performance. In that sense, they became a kind of third force, an autonomous intelligentsia operating in the space between the *poleis*. This position was reflected in the ideas that they developed.



It seems to me that this intelligentsia with its specific position was the driving force behind the trend towards *isonomia*, the constitutional form that enabled active participation of broad strata and thus paved the way for democracy.

The meagre sources available to us, together with our knowledge of the conditions of the times, cannot prove this, but they allow us at least to make plausible conjectures. Such conclusions are, of course, always risky. But the risk is less serious when we are talking about processes rather than events. And it seems in any case very improbable that a phenomenon as significant as the emergence of *isonomia* could have been due to short-term accidents.

To say that political thinking played a decisive role in that process is not to suggest that various other well-known factors were of little or no importance. They include military changes, such as the rise of the hoplite phalanx; economic developments which led to exploitation and resistance, but also to new ways of earning one's living; more intensive communication, the need for legal security, as well as religious factors and many others. And nobody would deny that the archaic Greeks were as strongly motivated by concrete interests as human beings in general. But the way people define and understand their interests depends on opinions, those of particular individuals as well as those of society in general. And these opinions are in turn related to knowledge and expectations, to relations between individuals, and to real or possible bonds of community. They can lead individuals to understand their interests in relatively concrete or relatively abstract terms; more specifically, the abstract and remote interests may appear as urgent alongside the concrete and pressing ones. Opinions may guide people towards a more self-centered or more communal pursuit of their goals, or more precisely inspire them to translate their own interests into collective efforts to change the general state of things. When indebted peasants, forced to mortgage their farms, resist the threat of slavery, they are responding to a perceived common condition and trying to avert a common danger. They may or may not succeed in improving their economic or legal situation, but those who lead them in attempting to do so can usually increase their share of power.

But how do members of broader strata arrive at the idea of a new political order that would give them more say in public affairs? Economic and legal issues may touch on relatively concrete interests, but the wish for more political participation let alone a new political order is more abstract. Moreover, this wish is not simply a reaction to temporary nuisances; rather, it represents a conclusion drawn from a whole range of troubling experiences. The lesson is difficult to learn and even more difficult to implement; all the more so because the institutionalization of participation must if anything be to change in the long run be more lasting than the problems which gave rise to the demand for it. It is not easy to reach agreement on such matters.

But that is precisely what the Greeks achieved at least in a significant number of cities. The secondary interest of many individuals in more participation became a dominant, common and unifying interest. As such, it gained extraordinary strength. Since the Greek regimes of *isonomia* and democracy demanded direct involvement of the citizens, the interest had to be accompanied by a lasting

readiness of a large number of people to take an active and regular part in politics, without becoming specialists in that field (such specialization only became possible in the later exceptional conditions of Periclean democracy).

This readiness cannot have arisen all of a sudden. And the same applies to other preconditions of *isonomia*: the mental preparation for new institutions, the acquisition of necessary knowledge, and the development of necessary expectations. Because the Greeks had no Greeks to learn from, they did not know anything about the possibility of *isonomia* (not to mention democracy) before they translated it into reality. There is, admittedly, no need to assume that the goal of *isonomia* was consciously formulated long before it was achieved. Rather, the movement in that direction may for most of the time have been articulated in terms of legal security, abolition of arbitrary power and other such concerns. There were, as noted above, many complaints that could motivate action.

But then there must have been a force capable of transforming diffuse discontent into political demands, of making it clear that people should not rest content with bearable or even relatively good economic conditions, and would not be well advised to adapt to the existing situation and put their trust in individual politicians; rather the thing most striving for and the only way to lead a satisfactory life was effective political participation by a wide public. People had to become citizens in the full political sense. For the Greeks, civic equality was (as Jacob Burckhardt noted) incompatible with political inequality: "To protect himself against injury, the poor citizen had to be able to vote, and to become judge as well as magistrate."<sup>2</sup>

Such insights, however, take time to be won, diffused and consolidated. For at least two centuries, the Greek cities were on the whole ruled by aristocracies, apart from the cases where individual aristocrats monopolized the power of their social groups and became tyrants. During this time, the idea of a genuine sharing of power by lower strata can only have matured slowly.

But how could that happen? How did political thinking come to identify with the community beyond the nobility, with the weak and the needy? What brings an intelligentsia to do that? This was, moreover, an intelligentsia living in a world without a philosophy of history, and therefore in search of a static and unchanging model of good order; and as far as we can judge, it had no need for the refined combination of luxury and a good conscience based on commitment to the underprivileged. We need, of course, not assume that the whole history of political thought took place within the ranks of this intelligentsia. It also and importantly involved the reception, diffusion and elaboration of the new ideas throughout society. But the decisive impulses must have come from a relatively narrow circle, which possessed the necessary knowledge and experience and had the necessary time and ability to produce ideas of a new kind. The interests of this group went beyond the immediate demands of the times, and they were reinforced by permanent communication.

<sup>2</sup> J. Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* vol. 1 (München 1977) 206.

In this way, an intellectual public sphere emerged; its activities took many different directions, but on the whole, the practical proposals of the intelligentsia responded to widespread expectations; aspirations, ideas and successful projects reinforced each other. In this sphere, arguments (or at least insights) counted for more than political interests. Certain standards of debate were established, and in the long run, they came albeit very slowly into general use. Our sources speak of proposals and programs submitted to public scrutiny and debate.

Most importantly, criteria and conceptions of proper order seem to have taken hold and acquired prescriptive authority. In this way, the specific third position of the intelligentsia was institutionalized. And as particular tendencies took shape and prevailed, they came to play the decisive role in developments. This trend was no less peculiar than the final outcome: The course of events was determined by a group of people who had power only in so far as it was entrusted to them by others, and whose primarily intellectual interests had to do with general order.

The beginnings of archaic Greek thought are in many ways reminiscent of the "wisdom" of the Near East, especially Egypt and Israel. Eastern influences must have been important, all the more so because the economic and social problems to be tackled were similar. And the tyrants, who in many ways embodied new and promising possibilities of action, may even for some time have inspired the sages. The course chosen by the Greek intelligentsia cannot have been certain from the outset.

But in the long run, other tendencies got the upper hand. Around 600 BC, Solon's conception of order as *eunomia* already represents a determined rejection of one-man rule. We do not know how new this idea was then, nor whether it was in line with the dominant current of political thought. There are, however, good reasons to believe that Solon's ideas soon came to be seen as authoritative.

These ideas were based on the observation of law-like patterns inherent in the *polis*. There was an obvious causal connection between the exploitation of the peasantry by the nobility, the discontent of the peasants and the outbreak of civil war. For Solon, this confirmed the old maxim that unjust action would be followed by punishment. Nomological knowledge and concrete observation reinforced each other. Such conclusions and other similar ones led Solon to construct a model of proper order that he believed to be predetermined by the gods. It could not include things that would have damaging consequences. By eliminating such things, one would arrive at *eunomia*, the order willed by the gods. Given the problems of the times, this order had to be defined in a comprehensive way. It had political, economic and social aspects, as well as ethical and religious ones. It was, on the whole, interpreted in a conservative sense. When in doubt, Solon tended to assume that inherited arrangements were good; he only sought to remedy abuses. For him, it was therefore self-evident that the nobility should rule and the people should follow. But the people should not be without rights. Free ownership of land by the peasants was a part of *eunomia*, and so was among other things the observance of certain norms by the nobility.

But however conservative this conception of order may have been (it could,

under the circumstances, hardly have been otherwise, and a return to earlier conditions may even have been the best thing for those in need of help), it also opened up the possibility of distinguishing between proper order and the status quo. It provided criteria for judgment on political order, liberated criticism and stimulated activity in order to achieve *eunomia*. The most essential characteristic of Solon's model was that it instituted a whole that was, in its capacity of order, beyond the reach of any single power. The ruling nobility had to operate within this framework. Order itself and as such was not negotiable. If it was defective in some way, it was the task of wise men to restore what was missing, or to give the appropriate advice. Order itself had a transcendent status and could not be identified with a particular power standing above others.

Soon afterwards, a similar view of the cosmos as an order going beyond all particular divine powers was formulated; it was obviously based on an analogy with the political model. Anaximander followed Solon in seeing order as a matter of balance between forces, rather than domination. But Solon only sought a synchronic balance within the properly ordered *polis*, whereas Anaximander sought a balance also in diachronic terms; one that allowed for the rise and decline of powers (this was clearly modeled on the destinies of families, dynasties and perhaps empires, rather than on the constitution of the *polis* as such).

From now on, political thought was committed to this idea of order, and therefore to the *polis* as a whole. If it wanted to take part in creating such an order, it had to oppose all excess and take the side of the underdog, if only in the interest of civil peace.

In the long run, however, it was bound to become clear that the profound political and ethical crisis of the Greek world called for more radical remedies: public order in the cities could only be improved if the population was provided with institutional means to protect itself. This could mean different things: councils to express the will of the community, popular courts, or more regular and powerful popular assemblies.

Solon had already appealed to all citizens and sought to convince them that they were responsible for order in the city. Even before that, the main body of the citizenry had at least been mobilized to the extent of demanding legislation by wise men. In the course of time, it became apparent that the public had to be motivated to more active and regular involvement; institutions appropriate to this purpose had to be created. In some of the most conflict-ridden cities, this meant nothing less than the construction of a new civic identity.

That is what Cleisthenes's reforms achieved in Athens at the end of the sixth century. But it was made possible by the growing prosperity of the general population under the tyranny of Peisistratos: economic stabilization had focused public attention on remaining political problems.

It was, in short, the institutionalized interest of the intelligentsia in general order that led to identification with the general public after a phase of struggle on behalf of the *polis* as a whole, in the absence of social forces that had yet to take shape and become capable of representing the whole. This involved a variety of factors that cannot be covered in this brief outline for example, the transvaluation

of values, expressed in lyric poetry, or the weakening of ties to the aristocracy. To cut a long story short, a general erosion of previously self-evident foundations sensitized the Greeks to new insights, modes of thought, and intellectual orientations, but also to new forms of friendship, citizenship and collective life.

As the political thought of the wise men (and then of broader circles) became more critical of the existing state of affairs and more responsive to new aspirations and sensibilities, it tended towards political empowerment of the people; and in this connection, the small size of the communities acquired a new significance. It was one of the preconditions for effective participation, just as the large number of separate cities was a precondition for the independence of the intelligentsia. Both factors were reinforced by others: the easily legible alphabet, the short distances between the communities, and the common language which they all used. The new military organization, a century older than *isonomia*, became politically significant when the peasant-hoplites knew that they could and should strive for regular participation in public decision-making. Hesiod's belief in justice could now be translated into desire, will, action and success. A broad spectrum of conditions and forces converged in one direction.

The availability of appropriate institutions that could secure the principles of participation against the nobility and against the inertia of the general population is perhaps less surprising than other aspects of early Greek history. Other cases (for example, the very different history of the early Roman republic) show that ways and means can be found to institutionalize a political will. The real difficulties had to do with giving this will political mass and momentum. The Roman plebeians had aristocratic leaders whom they trusted and who did fight for their cause. The structure of plebeian organization reflected that of Roman society as a whole. By contrast, the middle and lower strata of Greek society had to become much more directly involved in politics; in this they could be helped and had to be helped by individual aristocrats, but they had to insist on equal political rights. As a result, an artificial political order had to be created in opposition to the social one. And the population had to be politically active on a regular basis, not just in exceptional situations.

In short, the aristocrats who introduced *isonomia* in Greece were forced to provide the people with an organization which allowed for activity independent of particular leaders, and were capable of functioning on their own. These institutions were designed to generate a new kind of power that did not belong to leaders. The individuals who initiated change could only indirectly pursue their own interests. By giving political rights to the people, they destroyed the power basis of their opponents; for themselves, they gained prestige and influence. They did not profit from the institutions as such, only from the act of creating them. Greek institutions were, in other words, conceived in a more objective and abstract way than the Roman ones. For that reason too, a relatively long preparatory phase of thinking about institutions was needed.

This short discussion cannot deal with all aspects of the situation. We can only outline the constellation and the process that gave rise to *isonomia*, as well as the questions that arise on closer examination. To conclude, we should once

more underline the thoroughly surprising character of this prehistory of the first political order based on effective popular participation. And let us note the importance of political thought, independent of the powers of the time. For it seems to me that the intellectual preparation of democracy had to begin with an effort to think about the *polis* as a whole, and a search for balance and compromise in the interest of this whole. Exploitation and resistance to it, military mobilization of broad social strata and the specific conditions of small communities and various other factors may have been important. But only political thought defined in the sense of the social-historical process that I have tried to sketch could channel these forces in the direction of democracy. And that, in turn, was only possible because of a peculiar distribution of power, which for a long time prevented single rulers from imposing their solution to the crisis and then in the absence of predominant powers made it possible to invent orders which were neither centered on power nor initiated by a single overpowering actor.

The transition to more genuine democracy towards the middle of the fifth century was a matter of historical contingency: the prime cause was the victory over the Persians. Only then did the core question of the political order whether one, few or many should rule become a matter of human choice and decision. Established and more or less modifiable orders were replaced by constructed ones (even if they were constructed step by step). This opened up enormous possibilities, and gave rise to a unique consciousness of the ability to know and shape the accessible world. This new attitude reached far beyond politics and found expression in art, architecture, literature and philosophy. But the decisive role was played by politics. Because politics was central to the *polis*, the transformation of all political structures affected the whole human condition and posed a radical challenge to art and thought. The responses to this challenge, the ways of elaborating them and opening up new possibilities, became the "legacy of Greece". Inasmuch as the whole culture was particularly strongly influenced by politics, the Greek revolution in world history was pre-eminently political; more precisely, it consisted in the creation and/or discovery of the political, which then became directly or indirectly the dominant presence in Greek life.

# Political Thought, Civic Responsibility, and the Greek Polis

Kurt A. Raaflaub

Ancient Greek political thought, in its origins intimately linked with the emergence of the polis as a community of citizens (below, section 1), had a long history before it eventually stimulated Plato's and Aristotle's monumental works of political philosophy. This earliest phase of western political thought is accessible to us in the Homeric epics, in the works of Hesiod, Solon, and other archaic poets, in the achievements of early reformers and lawgivers, in fifth-century Athenian tragedy and comedy, in the historiography of Herodotus and Thucydides, and, of course, in the fragments of the presocratic philosophers and sophists. Despite the great interest inherent in this particular strand of the Greek intellectual tradition, it has rarely received the attention it deserves. The main reason probably is that such thought was not formulated in coherent and systematic treatises but woven into works of poetry and early prose, from which it must be extracted by careful interpretation and analysis, and that many of these early works survive only in fragments; the same is of course true of the writings of the early philosophers and sophists.

I should emphasize at the outset that to the Greeks all thought concerned with human society and community was "political". Thus "political thought" focused on the conditions and relationships within the polis and on the relations between communities. From the beginning it was not only interested in what we moderns see as specifically political but in a wide range of issues, including social and moral ones, that were considered as important as political institutions and decisions for the well-being of human societies.<sup>1</sup>

It is not my purpose here to give a survey of early Greek political thought.<sup>2</sup> Rather, in order to show how much can be gained from studying it, I shall

<sup>1</sup> Christian Meier, "Die Entstehung einer autonomen Intelligenz bei den Griechen" in id., *Die Welt der Geschichte und die Provinz des Historikers* (Berlin 1989) 85.

<sup>2</sup> Sketches of the development of early Greek political reflection from Homer to the end of the archaic age are offered in Kurt Raaflaub, "Die Anfänge des politischen Denkens bei den Griechen" in Iring Fetscher and Herwig Münkler (eds.), *Pipers Handbuch der politischen Ideen*, vol. 1: *Frühe Hochkulturen und europäische Antike* (Munich 1988) 189–271; "Poets, Lawgivers, and the Beginnings of Political Reflection in Archaic Greece" in Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge 2000); see also Christian Meier, "Die Griechen: die politische Revolution der Weltgeschichte", *Saeculum* 33 (1982) 133–47. English translation in the present volume: "Die Entstehung einer autonomen Intelligenz bei den Griechen" in *Die Welt der Geschichte und die Provinz des Historikers* (Berlin 1989) 70–100; *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, Transl. David McLintock (Cambridge, MA 1990) chapter 3; Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought* (Ithaca 1982); Kurt Raaflaub, "Politisches Denken im Zeitalter Athens" in Iring Fetscher and Herwig

examine three distinctive phases in its early history: its earliest reflection in Homer at a time when the concept of "civic responsibility" was first discovered; its crucial function in preparing the ground for the reforms of Solon, the Athenian lawgiver in the early sixth century, who created new structures in which such civic responsibility could be realized; and the role of political thought in the political crisis of democracy in the late fifth century, when the Athenian polis suffered from civil strife and constitutional turmoil, and when a revival of a shared sense of civic responsibility would have been crucial to overcome disaster and save the community.

## 1. Homer, Political Thought, and the Discovery of Civic Responsibility

### I

Not very long ago, this title would have raised eyebrows.<sup>3</sup> The poet or poets who composed the "Homeric epics", critics would have said, lived in a "prepolitical" period, long before politics were "discovered" in Greece, political institutions

Münkler (eds.), *Pipers Handbuch der politischen Ideen*, vol. 1: *Frühe Hochkulturen und europäische Antike* (Munich 1988) 273–368; Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy* (Baltimore 1993), and various chapters in Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge 2000) discuss political thought in the fifth century BCE. See also Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. II: *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge 1957).

<sup>3</sup> I use "Homer" as a label for the poet or poets who composed the extant monumental epics, most probably in the late eighth (Geoffrey S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 1: Books 1–4 [Cambridge 1985] 1–4; Joachim Latacz, *Homer: His Art and His World*. Transl. James P. Holoka [Ann Arbor 1996] 56–59) or early seventh century (Martin L. West, "The Date of the Iliad," *Museum Helveticum* 52 [1995] 203–19; see Raaflaub, "A Historian's Headache: How to Read 'Homeric Society'?" in Nick Fisher and Hans van Wees (eds.), *Archaic Greece: New Evidence and New Approaches* [London 1998] 187–88). How and when such epics that emerged from a long tradition of oral poetry were fixed and written down fortunately need not concern us here (e.g., Mark W. Edwards, *Homer: Poet of the Iliad* [Baltimore 1987]; Erwin Cook, *The Odyssey in Athens: Myths of Cultural Origins* [Ithaca 1995]; Latacz [as cited above]; Gregory Nagy, *Homeric Questions* [Austin 1996]). I quote Stanley Lombardo's (Indianapolis 1997) and occasionally Richmond Lattimore's (New York 1965) translation of the *Iliad*. Robert Fagles's (New York 1996) of the *Odyssey*. Line numbers are cited according to the Greek original; those of Lombardo's and Fagles's translations do not correspond exactly. This section is based on a lecture I gave in the spring of 1998 in a seminar of the Smithsonian Associates in Washington DC that was co-sponsored by the Society for the Preservation of the Greek Heritage (Anna Lea, President) and organized by Deborah Boedeker who also serves as editor of the publication in *The Iliad, the Odyssey, and Real Life* (Washington DC 1998). I thank the Society for the permission to reuse this essay here. Earlier versions of parts of this section were published in Kurt Raaflaub, "Homer and the Beginning of Political Thought in Greece" in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 4 (1988), 1–25; "Die Anfänge des politischen Denkens bei den Griechen", *Historische Zeitschrift* 248 (1998) 1–32 (both with rich bibliog.). Raaflaub, "Homeric Society" in Ian Morris and Barry Powell (eds.), *A New Companion to Homer* (Leiden, 1997) 624–48 offers a sketch of "Homeric society". The



were firmly established, and the "political sphere" assumed clearly defined importance in communal life. In a "prepolitical" period, strictly speaking, there can be no political thought. And, at any rate, the epics are not about politics but about heroes and heroic deeds. To such objections I offer two responses. One, theoretical – by accepting a suggestion by Dean Hammer – that "the political" need not be tied to a developed political sphere with fully established institutions and decision-making procedures; "the political" can also express itself through relationships and forms of interaction that are essential to a community's well being.<sup>4</sup> The other response is practical, based on two well-known passages.

One is from the *Iliad* – an epic, indeed, about heroes, persons larger than life, who lived in an "heroic age" in the distant past, when humans still mingled with gods and accomplished astonishing deeds. Surprisingly, however, the poet opens his song by announcing not these amazing deeds but a "story of a raging anger and its human toll".<sup>5</sup>

Rage! Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage,  
Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks  
Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls  
Of heroes into Hades' dark,  
And left their bodies to rot as feasts  
For dogs and birds, as Zeus' will was done.  
Begin with the clash between Agamemnon –  
The Greek warlord – and godlike Achilles (1.1–7).

Of course, the poet's choice of this particular focus is artistically ingenious. Moreover, exaggerated reactions are typical of heroes – even if they result in self-destruction or the death of thousands. But the poet's perspective, far from an uncritical glorification of heroes, in fact is the perspective of a community brought to the brink of disaster by the irresponsible behavior of two of its leaders. This communal perspective, I suggest, is a political perspective; we shall see that it plays a crucial role in large parts of the epic.

The second passage comes from the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, finally safe among the Phaeacians, is narrating his adventures. Near the land of the Cyclopes he found an uninhabited island, full of wild goats and ideal for a settlement (*Od.* 9.131–41). Yet the Cyclopes, he comments, did not take advantage of this opportunity because they have no ships and do not visit the cities of other people (125–29). Although (blessed by the gods) they live in golden-age abundance (107–11), they are outrageous and lawless (106), and despise the gods (273–78).

problem of the historicity of the Trojan War is addressed in Raaflaub, "Homer, the Trojan War, and History" in Deborah Boedeker (ed.), *The World of Troy: Homer, Schliemann, and the Treasures of Priam* (Washington, DC 1997) 74–97. All these essays give ample bibliographical references; hence I keep these brief in the present essay.

<sup>4</sup> Dean Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics: Politics in Performance* (forthcoming); "The Politics of the *Iliad*", *Classical Journal* 94 (1998–99) 1–30.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Lombardo (*supra* n. 2), xvi.

They have no meeting place for council, no laws either,  
 no, up on the mountain peaks they live in arching caverns –  
 each a law to himself, ruling his wives and children,  
 not a care in the world for any neighbor (112–15).

What the poet describes here is a completely atomized society, a non-community, consisting of unconnected, autonomous family units or households; in every respect this is the extreme opposite of normal human society.

To the Greeks, already at that time, normal human society meant a society living in and organized by the structures of a polis. This word, from which our term “political” is derived, is usually translated with “city-state” – misleadingly. Rather, the polis was a “citizen-state,” a community of citizens, of place or territory, of cults, customs and laws, and able to administer itself (fully or partly). In the classical period, most poleis had an urban center but a city was not necessary to constitute a polis. The most important component was the citizens. Several ancient authors say explicitly, “The men are the polis”. Hence the Achaean soldiers in their fortified camp on the shore near Troy or Xenophon’s ten thousand mercenaries, fighting their way back home through hostile Anatolia, form poleis, though temporary and improvised ones.<sup>6</sup>

The Phaeacians themselves live in such a polis. Nausicaa describes the main settlement to Odysseus:

... our city, ringed by walls  
 and strong high towers too, with a fine harbor either side,  
 and the causeway in is narrow; along the road the rolling ships  
 are all hauled up, with a slipway cleared for every vessel.  
 There’s our assembly, round Poseidon’s royal precinct,  
 built of quarried slabs planted deep in the earth.  
 Here the sailors tend their black ships’ tackle... (6.262–68).

The Phaeacians meet in assembly and are governed by a council of elders and a recognized leader; they respect the gods, are hospitable and generous to strangers, and have mastered the art of sailing beyond imagination. This, in other words, is an ideal polis.

<sup>6</sup> As described in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*: Achaean camp: Raaflaub, “Homer to Solon: The Rise of the Polis” in Mogens H. Hansen (ed.), *The Ancient Greek City-State* (Copenhagen 1993) 47–48. Men are the polis: e.g., Alcaeus fr. 112.10; 426 in David A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric I* (Cambridge, MA, 1982) 248–85, 426–27; Thucydides 7.77.7; cf. Herodotus 8.61. Citizen-state: W. G. Runciman, “Doomed to Extinction: The Polis as an Evolutionary Dead-End” in Oswyn Murray and Simon Price (eds.), *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford 1990) 348; Mogens H. Hansen, “The Polis as a Citizen-State” in Hansen (ed.), *The Ancient Greek City-State* (Copenhagen 1993) 7–29; Raaflaub, “Homer to Solon: The Rise of the Polis” *ibid.*, 43–44; more generally: Victor Ehrenberg, *The Greek State*, second edition (London 1969); Hansen, *Polis and City-State: An Ancient Concept and Its Modern Equivalent* (Copenhagen 1998).

Both the tale of the Cyclops and that of the Phaeacians could have been told perfectly well without emphasizing these aspects. The poet thus seems to make a conscious effort to conceptualize the polis by defining its constituent components and attitudes, both negatively and positively. The contrast is deliberate: there the self-centered monsters who lack a community and violate every norm; here a people who do everything right and fully share their communal experience. As Stephen Scully observes,<sup>7</sup> in the epics the polis represents civilization, communication, community, and justice; not to live in a polis means primitiveness, isolation, lack of community, and lawlessness. Such conceptualization is not possible without political awareness and a political perspective.

Many scholars disagree with this conclusion: in their view, in Homer the word *polis* meant little more than a fortified site, a town, in which the households (*oikoi*, from *oikos*, house) were largely independent.<sup>8</sup> Others insist that Homer's epics do not permit a historical, let alone a political, interpretation because the world they describe is not historical but a poetic fantasy world or a mixture of elements from many historical periods, ranging from the Bronze to the Archaic Ages. Such objections by serious scholars should not be taken lightly. Recent research, however, has compiled a broad range of evidence and arguments to support a different position. I limit myself here to summarizing the main points.<sup>9</sup>

## II

To oral epic, composed anew in each performance, the interaction between singer and audience was essential. Fantasy, exaggeration, and archaic elements were part of the genre, important to create distance between the present and the narrated events, and to elevate these into a heroic sphere; they were balanced by the listeners' need to identify with the human drama and ethical dilemmas described in the songs. In each performance, the singer placed actions by, and interactions among, "heroic" individuals into a social context that reflected

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Scully, "The Polis in Homer: A Definition and Interpretation," *Ramus* 10 (1981) 5-9; cf. id., *Homer and the Sacred City* (Ithaca 1990).

<sup>8</sup> E.g., M.I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, second edition (London 1977) 34, 155-56; Chester G. Starr, *Individual and Community: The Rise of the Polis 800-500 BC* (New York 1986) chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> Against historicity of "Homeric Society": e.g., A. A. Long, "Morals and Values in Homer," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 90 (1970) 121-39; Anthony Snodgrass, "An Historical Homeric Society?," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 94 (1974) 114-25; Robin Osborne, *Greece in the Making, 1200-479 BC* (London 1996) 137-60, 367-68. I have summarized the arguments for historicity in Raafaub, "A Historian's Headache" (*supra* n. 3) 169-93; see also Ian Morris, "The Use and Abuse of Homer," *Classical Antiquity* 5 (1986) 81-138; Christoph Ulf, *Die homerische Gesellschaft* (Munich 1990); Barbara Patzek, *Homer und Mykene* (Munich 1992); Hans van Wees, *Status Warriors: War, Violence, and Society in Homer and History* (Amsterdam 1992); S. Douglas Olson, *Blood and Iron: Stories and Storytelling in Homer's Odyssey* (Leiden 1995) chapter 9; Raafaub, "Homer to Solon" (*supra* n. 6); "Homeric Society" (*supra* n. 3); "Politics and Interstate Relations in the World of Greek Poleis: Homer and Beyond", *Antichthon* 31 (1997) 1-27.

social, economic and political conditions, values and relationships that were familiar to the audience. To put it simply, the epics did through a mythical-heroic past what Star Trek does through futuristic science fiction. Scholars have found much evidence supporting the view that the social picture drawn by the epics is both consistent and plausible enough to represent a historical society.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Jonathan Shay could not have identified such close and fascinating parallels between the behavior and psychological reactions of Trojan and Vietnam War fighters if Homer had not known exactly what he was describing;<sup>11</sup> his descriptions must have concerned phenomena familiar to his audience, and likely were based on personal experience rather than a long-standing tradition fossilized in song. As Odysseus himself comments on one bard's song, "how true to life, all too true... you sing the Achaeans' fate, all they did and suffered, all they soldiered through, as if you were there yourself or heard from one who was" (*Od.* 8.489–91). Moreover, since epic poetry enjoyed panhellenic acceptance,<sup>12</sup> it must have been widely attractive and meaningful, despite local differences. I believe, therefore, that the "Homeric world" reflects conditions, relationships and concerns typical of wide parts of Hellas at or shortly before the poet's own time.

The "Homeric world" is a world full of poleis. The natural assumption throughout the epics is that people live in poleis. These communities, though reflecting an early, far from fully developed and integrated form of the polis, show all the essential characteristics known from later periods.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in the poet's imagination the Trojan War – despite its epic, panhellenic and trans-Aegean dimensions – resembles a war between two neighboring poleis on opposite sides of a large plain: Troy and the temporary polis of the Achaeans on the shore – a constellation familiar throughout Greek history and attested for the first time precisely in Homer's time.<sup>14</sup>

In this Homeric polis all citizens, except for the poor and landless, have important communal functions in the army and assembly. Communal structures are loose but well established: assembly and council, though not formalized, play an important and fairly regular role. There is a sense of a public realm, separated from the private, and an awareness of a communal will and action, attributed collectively to the demos, the people, both domestically and in dealing with other poleis.<sup>15</sup>

Homer was a contemporary of the age of "colonization," when thousands, in search of land and better fortunes, emigrated from Greece and founded communi-

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Finley (*supra* n. 8); Walter Donlan, "Reciprocities in Homer", *Classical World* 75 (1981/82) 137–75; Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece*, second edition (Cambridge, MA 1993) chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam* (New York 1995); Lawrence Tritle, "Hector's Body: Mutilation in Ancient Greece and Vietnam", *Ancient History Bulletin* 11 (1998) 123–36.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore 1979); *Pindar's Homer* (Baltimore 1990), especially chapters 2–3.

<sup>13</sup> Raaflaub, "Homer to Solon" (*supra* n. 6).

<sup>14</sup> Raaflaub, "Soldiers, Citizens, and the Evolution of the Early Greek Polis" in Lynette G. Mitchell and Peter J. Rhodes (eds.), *The Development of the Polis in Archaic Greece* (London, 1997) 49–59.

<sup>15</sup> Kurt Raaflaub, "Politics and Interstate Relations in the World of Greek Poleis: Homer and Beyond", *Antichthon* 31 (1997) 1–27.

ties all around the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Not accidentally, Odysseus' tales of his Cyclops and Phaeacian adventures show clear evidence of such colonizing experiences (the suitability of "goat island" for a settlement [*Od.* 9.131–41], the foundation of Scheria [6.4–10], and its description, quoted above). In an age when people constantly founded new poleis, they could not help but think about the elements needed to build a good community.<sup>16</sup> Hence we are not astonished to find the poet capable of conceptualizing the polis and looking at the heroic actions from a communal perspective. Yet we need to be cautious: although the epics contain much political and social information, their topic is not society and politics, and Homer was not a historian, sociologist, political scientist or anthropologist. Hence he focuses on the great individuals rather than the masses of commoners, on deeds and events rather than structures. The information important for our present purposes often is not part of the foreground that is emphasized – it is tucked away in background descriptions, side remarks and little stories that explain specific objects or persons – and the poet can simply not be expected to tell us everything he knows. Moreover, he was singing for an audience that was familiar with how things worked and functioned; there was no need to explain everything in detail.<sup>17</sup>

A couple of examples will illustrate what I mean. At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, the people of Ithaca are called to an assembly. An old man observes that this has not happened since Odysseus' departure for Troy, and wonders what has prompted it now (2.25–34). Since Odysseus left almost twenty years ago, this statement implies that no assembly was held for two decades. Moreover, the poet pays much attention to Odysseus' house and estate but very little to the community of Ithaca. All this has prompted some scholars to conclude that in Homeric society the assembly was insignificant, the community unimportant, undeveloped, hardly existing; what really mattered in this society were the individual and his *oikos*. Upon closer examination, things look different. Ten years (of war at Troy, and of homecoming) in epic language mean "very long". Like other large and round numbers (of slaves, ships, soldiers), it is not meant to be taken literally but to elevate the epic description to heroic dimensions. Now a twenty-year interval between Odysseus' departure and return makes sense in the context of the folktale underlying the story of Odysseus' homecoming: the baby-son he left behind has grown up, and so can assist his father in reconquering his *oikos*. But in other contexts, such a time frame does not make any sense at all. No one in Homer's eighth- or early seventh-century audience could have imagined concretely a military expedition abroad lasting ten years – let alone one that combined contingents from all of Greece against a similarly vast combined force of the East. In Homer's time, wars consisted either of fights between neighboring cities or raiding expeditions, conducted on sea or land by a few noblemen with

<sup>16</sup> Ernest Barker, *Greek Political Theory* (London 1960 [1918]) 4–6.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Donlan, "The Unequal Exchange between Glaucus and Diomedes in Light of the Homeric Gift-Economy", *Phoenix* 43 (1989) 1–15; "Duelling with Gifts in the *Iliad*: As the Audience Saw It", in Hanna M. and Joseph Roisman (eds.), *Essays on Homeric Epic*, *Colby Quarterly* 29:3 (1993) 155–72.

their followers. Both types of war are amply attested in the epics and in historical traditions about events contemporary with the epics, and both would have lasted a few days or, at most, weeks.<sup>18</sup> That no assembly was held while the leader was away on such a raid is plausible enough. Moreover, the *Odyssey* is concerned with a hero's efforts to regain control in his *oikos*. Although the community is deeply affected by these events, it is the poem's internal logic, not contemporary social reality, which determines the poet's primary focus on this *oikos*. Hence we should be cautious in drawing far-reaching conclusions on the overall importance of assembly and community in the society involved. What is in fact quite remarkable, given these circumstances, is how much attention the poet *does* pay to assembly and community.

Another example: scholars long thought that the early communities depicted in the epics were so undeveloped that contacts or bonds among them could be established not through communal institutions but only through personal devices provided by household and kinship.<sup>19</sup> Looking more closely, however, we find stories and anecdotes, told in passing and thus taken for granted, that offer a different picture. For instance, at the point when Odysseus' famous bow, about to become a crucial tool of revenge, is first mentioned, the poet tells a little tale (*Od.* 21.11–21): when Odysseus was a young man, Messenians abducted from Ithaca a large herd of sheep and the shepherds. The *basileus* (paramount leader) and *gerontes* (elders, councilors) of Ithaca sent him as ambassador to demand restoration and compensation from the people of Messenia. While staying with a guestfriend (*xenos*) of his family in Messenia, he met a man with whom he concluded friendship and exchanged gifts: the bow for a sword and spear (31–35). Quite incidentally, we thus learn two important facts: the community of the Ithacans, represented by leader and council, held the Messenians collectively responsible for the deed of the sheep rustlers, and diplomacy was the first step in seeking redress. From other stories (such as one told by Nestor about events in his own youth [in *Il.* 11.670–762], or incidental remarks on the prelude of the Trojan War [in *Il.* 3.205–24; 11.122–25, 138–42], we learn that Odysseus as ambassador would have been introduced by his *xenos* to the Messenian assembly to present the Ithacans' claims. If the Messenians reacted positively, the matter would be settled peacefully; if not, the Ithacans might cross over to Messenia in full force and the issue would be decided in a pitched battle. Before this battle, the Messenian leader of the sheep rustlers and the Ithacan owner of the stolen sheep might propose a duel to decide the issue between themselves – as Paris and Menelaos do in *Iliad* bk.3. In this case, the paramount leaders of the communities involved would conclude an agreement, sealed by oaths, sacrifices and prayers, and witnessed by both armies – as it happens in *Iliad* 3.245–323. Such an agreement between two communities, whether at war or in peace, could equally well serve to conclude an alliance. It is clear therefore that communication among communities was conducted not only through personal relations among

<sup>18</sup> Raaflaub (*supra* n. 14).

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Finley (*supra* n. 8) 98–99.

elite leaders; the council and the assembly played an essential role: interstate relations were a public issue, discussed and decided upon in the public sphere.<sup>20</sup>

### III

So much for preliminaries. Let us now examine a few scenes more closely; they all play in an assembly. The *Iliad* begins with a quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. Agamemnon makes two serious mistakes. He offends Apollo's priest and provokes the god's wrath, thus causing the death of many men (1.8–52). And he offends Achilles, prompting him to withdraw from the war (1.53–305). In both cases, Agamemnon acts against the clearly expressed sentiments of the assembly. In Homer's interpretation, this is a conflict between the leader and his most eminent follower. Achilles is the better fighter and the son of a goddess but he is not equal to Agamemnon who commands the greater number of men and thus is the paramount leader. The stronger has to subordinate himself to the more powerful: a difficult situation that requires tact and mutual respect, qualities that are lacking in both. Achilles has every right to remind Agamemnon of his duties, to point out his mistakes, and to be offended by the leader's decision to make another pay for his own loss. But that it is Achilles, of all people, who says these things, and how he says them, is unbearable to Agamemnon who feels threatened by his overbearing rival and compelled to demonstrate his power over him – whatever the consequences,

so that you will see just how much  
stronger I am than you, and the next person will wince  
at the thought of opposing me as an equal (1.185–87).

This is a realistic scene, perhaps all too familiar to the audience. Indeed, the poet does not just describe the quarrel between two eminent men but strongly emphasizes its consequences for the community. Agamemnon is fully aware of his obligations – he says, “I myself desire that my people be safe, not perish” (1.117). But his pride prevails, and he causes immense damage to his people.

On the other hand, by withdrawing from the war, Achilles provides the immediate cause for the Greeks' suffering – and he knows it:

<sup>20</sup> On assembly and political institutions in Homeric society, see, e.g., Pierre Carlier, *La Royauté en Grèce avant Alexandre* (Strasbourg 1984) chapter 2; Fritz Gschnitzer, “Zur homerischen Staats- und Gesellschaftsordnung: Grundcharakter und geschichtliche Stellung” in Joachim Latacz (ed.), *Zweihundert Jahre Homer-Forschung: Rückblick und Ausblick* (Stuttgart 1991) 182–204; Egon Flaig, “Das Konsensprinzip im homerischen Olymp. Überlegungen zum göttlichen Entscheidungsprozess Ilias 4.1–72”, *Hermes* 122 (1994) 13–31; Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, “Agorai bei Homer” in Walter Eder and Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp (eds.), *Volk und Verfassung im vorhellenistischen Griechenland* (Stuttgart 1997) 1–19; Raaflaub (*supra* n. 15); Françoise Ruzé, *Délibération et pouvoir dans la cité grecque de Nestor à Socrate* (Paris 1997).

When every last Greek desperately misses Achilles,  
 your remorse won't do any good then,  
 when Hector the man-killer swats you down like flies.  
 And you will eat your heart out  
 because you failed to honor the best Greek of all (1.240–44).

By sacrificing the common good to their personal feelings, both leaders violate the “heroic code” and thereby threaten the very foundation of their privileged position. For the leader’s honor and status are tied to his obligation to excel in fighting for his community – as the Lycian Sarpedon expresses it in conversation with his second-in-command, Glaukos:

You know how you and I  
 have the best of everything in Lycia –  
 seats, cuts of meat, full cups, everybody  
 looking at us as if we were gods?  
 Not to mention our estates on the Xanthus,  
 fine orchards and riverside wheat fields.  
 Well, now we have to take our stand at the front,  
 where all the best fight, and face the heat of battle,  
 so that many an armored Lycian will say,  
 “So they’re not inglorious after all,  
 our Lycian lords who eat fat sheep  
 and drink the sweetest wine. No,  
 they’re strong, and fight with our best” (Il. 12.310–21).

Hector meets this obligation admirably: his name means “holder” or “savior”, and the Trojans have named his son Skamandrios Astyanax, “Lord of the city”, for, as the poet explains, “Hector alone could save Ilion now” (6.402–3).<sup>21</sup>

The quarrel in the Greek camp involves the two most powerful men. Hence the assembly and the other leaders are incapable of resolving the conflict – understandably, since law courts, offices, and procedures anchored in communal law were undeveloped, and the fighting parties were not *willing* to submit to arbitration. The primary responsibility, however, lies with Agamemnon; he has to bear the brunt of popular anger, as it is expressed vividly in the famous “temptation scene” (*diapheira*) in book 2. In reaction to his attempt to test the resolve of his men, the masses rush to the ships. No, this war is not popular, especially after Achilles’ withdrawal. With great difficulty Odysseus restores order. But one man goes on ranting: Thersites, full of insults, a rabble-rouser, and the ugliest soldier in the army,

bowlegged, walking with a limp, his shoulders  
 slumped over his caved-in chest, and up top  
 scraggly fuzz sprouted on his pointy head (2.216–19).

<sup>21</sup> Gregory Nagy (*supra* n. 12) 145–47.



He is an anti-hero in every respect, and when Odysseus beats him up the crowd is delirious (244–78). Having thus made clear that this man counts for nothing, the poet can let him say what actually is to be taken very seriously. For Thersites not only, as the poet says explicitly, vents the anger of the masses (222–3) but repeats Achilles' criticism of Agamemnon in book 1. He berates the leader for his greed and obsession with women, and continues:

...It's not right  
for a leader to march our troops into trouble.  
You Achaeans are a disgrace, Achaean women, not men!  
Let's sail home in our ships and leave him here  
to stew over his prizes so he'll have a chance to see  
whether he needs our help or not (233–38).

Clearly, Agamemnon's self-centered behavior has caused a deep crisis of leadership and threatens the success of the whole enterprise. The rebellion of his most important follower with all his men, the enthusiastic "vote by feet" of the whole army to end the war there and then, and the tirades of the anti-hero *par excellence* are all expressions of profound dissatisfaction. Odysseus firmly rejects popular claims to know what is best for the community, especially in war, but it is remarkable enough that he feels compelled to do so:

Do you think every Greek here can be a king?  
It's no good having a carload of commanders. We need  
one commander, one king, to whom Zeus... has given the staff  
and the right to make decisions for the people (203–6).

This scene, I think, attests to an awareness that the masses fighting in the war and sitting in the assembly represent at least a potential power factor. Otherwise it would be futile to decry the people's passiveness and lack of courage. Moreover, we should keep in mind that it is the leader's failure to meet his responsibility for the common welfare that causes the crisis.

As the epic continues, the poet carefully pursues the lines of development that begin in these opening scenes. Agamemnon soon realizes his mistake but the stakes are high and it takes both sides long to overcome pride and hurt.<sup>22</sup> The conflict is finally resolved in book 12, with great formality and in an assembly: the community has witnessed the outbreak of the quarrel; it now witnesses and legitimizes the reconciliation of its two leaders.<sup>23</sup> Admission of mistakes, oaths, and compensation seal the return of domestic peace. Agamemnon earns praise and honor: he now is "more just" than before (19.181–83). The message is clear: everybody makes mistakes; the community encourages those who are able to learn from them and make amends for them.

<sup>22</sup> Donna F. Wilson, *The Politics of Compensation in the Homeric Iliad* (forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> Eric A. Havelock, *The Greek Concept of Justice from Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato* (Cambridge, MA 1978) chapter 7.

What about the Trojans? After all, the war with all its miseries has been brought upon them by Paris' abduction of the Spartan leader's wife and treasures. Among them, too, this war is not popular: "To a man," the poet says, "they hated Paris as they hated death itself" (3.454; cf. 7.390). Hector bitterly chastizes his brother after his lamentable performance in the duel with Menelaos:

You're nothing but trouble for your father and your city,  
a joke to your enemies and an embarrassment to yourself...  
It's the Trojans who are cowards, or you'd have long since  
been dressed out in stones for all the harm you've done (3.39–57).

But noble Hector is not free of faults either. Having killed Patroklos, he renews his attack on the Achaean camp. Just before nightfall, Achilles appears on the rampart: no doubt, he is about to return to the battle. In an assembly (*Il.* 18.243–313), Polydamas, Hector's brother, "the only Trojan who looked both ahead and behind," "as good with words as Hector was with a spear" (250, 252), urges the Trojans to return to the city and concentrate on defending it. Hector refuses and persuades his men to camp out on the battlefield and continue their attack (310–3). The outcome is disastrous: Achilles single-handedly defeats the Trojans and in the end faces Hector who alone has remained outside the gates. Why? The poet lets him explain it clearly enough:

Now what? If I take cover inside  
Polydamas will be the first to reproach me.  
He begged me to lead the Trojans back  
to the city on that black night when Achilles rose.  
But I wouldn't listen, and now I've destroyed  
half the army through my recklessness.  
I can't face the Trojan men and women now,  
can't bear to hear some lesser man say,  
"Hector trusted his strength and lost the army."  
That's what they'll say. I'll be much better off  
facing Achilles, either killing him  
or dying honorably before the city (22.99–110).

In both camps, then, the leader who ignores popular opinion and/or good advice, but fails with his plan and endangers his community, is in deep trouble.

#### IV

The beginning of the *Odyssey* features another assembly. Odysseus is presumed dead. A band of suitors, sons of the best families from near and far, have occupied his house, pressuring his wife Penelope to agree to a new marriage. Her scheming reluctance has induced them to persist; they are threatening the leader's oikos with economic ruin, thereby also weakening Telemachos' chances to succeed his

father. Encouraged by Athena, Telemachos finally fights back. He convenes an assembly. As an old man observes, there has not been one since the leader left; the reason must be important: a threat of war or some other public business (*Od.* 2.30–32). The assembly, that is, does not deal with private affairs, not even those of the leader's oikos. Yes, says Telemachos, I know, but the evils that have befallen my house, caused by the suitors, are intolerable, a disgrace.

You should be ashamed yourselves,  
mortified in the face of neighbors living round about!  
Fear the gods' wrath – before they wheel in outrage  
and make these crimes recoil on your heads.  
I beg you by Olympian Zeus..., stop it!...  
Unless, of course, you think my noble father Odysseus  
did the ...Achaean damage, deliberate harm,  
and to pay me back you'd do me harm, deliberately  
setting these parasites against me (64–74).

Although private business, the fate of Odysseus' oikos is a public concern because the reputation of the community is at stake, and its safety may be in peril if indeed the gods punish injustice (143f.; cf. 1.378–80). Telemachos' strongest argument thus is based on religious belief and hope. Zeus promptly sends an omen; the seer interprets it: Odysseus is close, the suitors are in mortal danger, many others in Ithaca will be hurt; let's straighten things out while there is time (161–69). To no avail: the people, though overcome by compassion, keep silent (81–83), and the suitors fear neither Telemachos nor the gods and see no reason to drop their competition for queen and leadership (85ff., esp. 111–28; 198–201).

Then old Mentor, a friend of Odysseus' family, speaks up (229–41). He does not reproach the suitors for their violent deeds because they are staking their own lives in injuring the house of Odysseus (235–38, cf. 281–84). In other words: what else do you expect of young noblemen? A revealing comment on the behavior typical of the elite. But Mentor criticizes the people in the assembly:

But all the rest of you, how you rouse my fury!  
Sitting here in silence...  
never a word put forth to curb these suitors,  
paltry few as they are and you so many! (239–41)

What appears a distant possibility in the *Iliad* is here turned into a direct appeal, expressed not by the despicable Thersites but by the respected Mentor. He then justifies the need for such communal involvement:

Never let any sceptered king be kind and gentle now,  
...or set his mind on justice –  
no, let him be cruel and always practice outrage.  
Think: not one of the people whom he ruled  
remembers Odysseus now, that godlike man,  
and kindly as a father to his children! (230–34)

In other words, the possibility Telemachos pondered at the end of his speech (quoted above) does not apply: nobody had reason to hate Odysseus and harm him in revenge; he was a good leader (cf. 5.8–12), without the faults one ordinarily expects from men in his position (cf. *Il.* 1.78–83). As Penelope says to the suitors on another occasion,

What, didn't you listen  
to your fathers – when you were children, years ago –  
telling you how Odysseus treated them, your parents?  
Never an unfair word, never an unfair action  
among his people here, though that's the way  
of our god-appointed kings,  
hating one man, loving the next, with luck.  
Not Odysseus. Never an outrage done to any man alive.  
But you..., you and your ugly outbursts, shameful acts,  
they're plain to see. Look at the thanks he gets  
for all past acts of kindness! (4.687–95).

For these merits, the community is obliged to Odysseus and his family. In ignoring such obligations, it violates traditional norms, just as the behavior of some of the suitors is doubly objectionable because they ignore personal obligations toward their benefactor Odysseus (the example of Antinoos is mentioned in 16.424–32). By showing such lack of gratitude, the community sets a negative example; henceforth, there will be no incentive for a leader to put the interests of the community above his own.

While Telemachos stressed moral and religious concerns, Mentor argues politically: what appears to be a private conflict, in fact is of utmost importance to the community, not only because it affects its reputation and safety but because it is going to determine in the future the relationship between leader and polis, and thereby the well-being of all. To take a stand therefore is indispensable. Here we find, I think, the earliest case in which a cause-and-effect relationship is observed on a primarily political level, and then applied to a political issue.

Mentor remains unsuccessful. Since many suitors come from the leading families of Ithaca, no one is willing to support popular sentiment with dramatic action. But Telemachos has shown unexpected initiative and determination – enough to alarm the suitors: eventually, he might succeed in arousing the people against them (4.630–72). Their attempt to assassinate him fails. One of them says:

The clever little schemer, he does have his skills,  
and the crowds no longer show us favor, not at all.  
So act! before he can gather his people in assembly.  
... He'll rise and rage away, shouting out to them all how we,  
we schemed his sudden death but never caught him.  
Hearing of our foul play, ... they might do us damage, run us off our lands,  
drive us abroad... Strike first, I say, and kill him! (16.361ff., esp. 374–83).

Their plan, of course, will not be realized.

# V

We have examined several assembly scenes. We could go on to look at scenes that deal with other kinds of problems. Or we could discuss a different type of relationship to which the poet pays much attention, between the powerful and the powerless. It is surely not accidental that the weakest in society, suppliants and refugees, are protected by the most powerful god, Zeus himself, and that the suitors, the elite of noble youth, are described as consistently violating the norms of socially acceptable behavior in this respect too.<sup>24</sup> Their disaster therefore represents deserved punishment for multiple trespasses – or so it seems. Interestingly, although everybody agrees that the suitors deserve to die, it remains curiously unclear why exactly this should be so, especially when, after their ringleader's death, they offer apology and full compensation to Odysseus (*Od.* 22.44–59).<sup>25</sup> The poet, it seems to me, found it difficult to accommodate this traditional tale with its heroic but needlessly bloody ending, when in his own time polis communities were engaged in serious efforts to curb individual violence and establish a system of communally based justice. Hence, although it has troubled generations of scholars,<sup>26</sup> to this poet the ending of the *Odyssey*, with the threat of civil war averted only by divine fiat (24.412–548), was indispensable.

Let me sum up, explain, and then look beyond Homer. The concerns emphasized by the epic poet in the scenes we have discussed and in many other passages focus on basic problems of relationships in a community. What are the qualities of a good leader and how can these be fostered or enforced? How can the interests of the community be protected without sacrificing the strong and effective leadership the polis needs to survive? What should the role of assembly and council be? How can conflicts among elite leaders be contained and resolved? When and to what extent does the community need to be involved with the private sphere? What is justice and how can it be upheld? What is the individual's responsibility for his own and the common welfare – especially in view of divine power and intervention? All of these are political questions. In keeping with the epics' poetic nature, the poet integrates his political reflection into the narrative and expresses it through action and speech. He uses traditional mythical song to dramatize ethical and political problems that are important to his audience. Such topical use of myth is facilitated by the conventions of oral poetry which give the singer much creative freedom to react to changing conditions and preoccupations of the audience. By presenting positive and negative models of social behavior,

<sup>24</sup> Eric A. Havelock (*supra* n. 23) chapter 9.

<sup>25</sup> Alfred Heubeck, Stephanie West and J. B. Hainsworth, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, vol. I (Oxford 1988) 56–60.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Russo, Manuel Fernandez-Galiano and Alfred Heubeck, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, vol. III (Oxford 1992) 342–45, 353–55.

by illuminating the causes and consequences of certain actions and relating those to the well-being of the community, the poet raises the level of awareness among his listeners, he educates them. Here, I suggest, lie the roots of Greek political thought.

Why did such thought evolve in this particular corner of the world? To find an answer, we might listen again to the singer. At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Zeus complains about Aegistheus, who, ignoring explicit divine warnings, has seduced Clytemnestra and, with her help, murdered Agamemnon.

Ah how shameless – the way these mortals blame the gods.  
 From us alone, they say, come all their miseries, yes,  
 but they themselves, with their own reckless ways,  
 compound their pains beyond their proper share (1.32–34).

All mortals are assigned their “share” (*moira*) but they cause most of their sufferings themselves. Overall, Homer and Hesiod, his perhaps slightly younger contemporary, attribute a decisive role as promoters and enforcers of justice to the gods, particularly to Zeus, mostly because there is no sufficiently powerful and just human agent to rely upon for such purposes. But the problems tackled by the poets’ political reflection fit into an entirely human framework of cause, effect, and responsibility. The gods punish evildoers and their communities; through seers, poets, or leaders blessed by them, they may offer advice about salutary measures to be taken in a crisis, but they neither cause nor resolve such a crisis. Crisis in human society is caused by specific human mistakes or irresponsible acts, and it must be resolved by that society itself. It is man’s responsibility for the well-being of his community, therefore, upon which Greek thinking focuses from the very beginning, and that, I propose, makes it truly *political* thought.

This in turn provides at least part of an explanation. A comparison with the structures and social values of near-eastern societies could be helpful here.<sup>27</sup> Very briefly, unlike many near-eastern societies, Greek society was not dominat-

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Thorkild Jacobsen, “Mesopotamia” in Henry Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago 1946 [1977]) 125–219; Jean-Pierre Vernant (*supra* n. 2). This is a topic that is in urgent need of systematic treatment for which, however, foundations need to be laid and bridges across disciplines built first; Jan Assmann, *Ma’at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* (Munich 1990) has no Mesopotamian counterpart. For preliminary attempts, see Kurt Raaflaub and Elisabeth Müller-Luckner (eds.), *Anfänge politischen Denkens in der Antike: Die nahöstlichen Kulturen und die Griechen* (Munich 1993); K.D. Irani and Morris Silver (eds.), *Social Justice in the Ancient World* (Westport 1995); Jan Assmann, Bernhard Janowski and Michael Welker (eds.), *Gerechtigkeit: Richten und Retten in der abendländischen Tradition und ihren altorientalischen Ursprüngen* (Munich 1998); Kurt Raaflaub, “Poets, Lawgivers, and the Beginnings of Political Reflection in Archaic Greece” (*supra* n. 2) 50–57. For near-eastern influences on Greek myth and poetry, see Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, MA 1992); Martin West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford 1997).

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ed by a sacred kingship. Obedience and subordination were not the principal virtues. Greek religion did not demand the acceptance of an absolute divine will. Authority was not unassailable; criticism and independence were not frowned upon. In fact, they were encouraged. In a country where large and centralized territorial states could not develop easily, the mostly small and topographically confined polis became the predominant form of community. From the beginning, recent research has shown, it was built on a substantial egalitarian foundation.<sup>28</sup> The paramount leader, relying on his personal resources and qualities, was first among equals. The other members of the elite, although differentiated in wealth and influence, enjoyed basic equality.<sup>29</sup> In their intense competition for power and status, they were all vulnerable to criticism. Despite their proud self-representation, only a relatively small gap separated them from the broad class of independent farmers.<sup>30</sup> These farmers played a communally indispensable role in the polis army and assembly. The elite depended on them and increasingly had to recognize and respect their sentiments and will. Again, criticism was possible.

Such criticism was especially poignant when the interests of the powerful individual clashed with those of the community, often with detrimental consequences for both sides, as the epic examples illustrate impressively. I believe it is precisely the dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of aristocratic leadership, the conflict between individual and communal aspirations, which prompted the beginnings of political thought. By observing, criticizing, and even refuting some of the values and attitudes of the leading class, early thinkers began to analyze and define the essential problems and needs of the community, and then to conceive of and propagate alternative values and possibilities of behavior. Singers and poets participated in this process, dramatizing ethical and political problems in their songs, constantly focusing on the individual's communal function and responsibility, and thereby helping to find answers to questions that were important to all: what made communities function well, what were the elements of justice and good leadership, and how could an as yet unknown concept be realized that we call "civic responsibility"?

A prime example for this function of song and poetry is, of course, Hesiod. In his *Works and Days*, he criticizes the shortcomings of elite leadership and the "crooked judgements" of noble judges, emphasizes the detrimental consequences of such injustice for the entire community, and encourages the pursuit of justice. Woven into his *Theogony*, he presents, as a model for human leaders, a carefully crafted picture of the just regime of Zeus among the gods. His problem is that he

<sup>28</sup> Ian Morris, "The Strong Principle of Equality and the Archaic Origins of Greek Democracy" in Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (eds.), *DEMOKRATIA: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern* (Princeton 1996) 19–48; Kurt Raaflaub, "Equalities and Inequalities in Athenian Democracy", *ibid.* 139–74.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Dunlan, *The Aristocratic Ideal in Ancient Greece* (Lawrence 1980) chapter 1. Reprinted in *id.*, *The Aristocratic Ideal and Selected Papers* (Wauconda IL 1999).

<sup>30</sup> Chester G. Starr, *The Economic and Social Growth of Early Greece 800–500 BC* (New York 1977) chapter 6.

has little to go on except his belief in Zeus' justice. In fact, his distrust of human leadership is so pronounced that he recommends to his listeners to stay away from the polis and its quarrels; and to focus entirely on their farms and good relations with their neighbors.<sup>31</sup> A decisive breakthrough in the development of political thought, however, came about a century later; it deserves special attention.

## 2. Solon and the Discovery of Politics

### I

Solon, the Athenian statesman and lawgiver, was elected archon (chief magistrate) in 594 BCE. He was given unlimited authority to resolve a severe social and economic crisis that had brought his polis to the brink of civil war. The causes of this crisis are elusive but there is little doubt about the symptoms: debt (in form of loans in kind and obligations) was rampant among small and middling farmers, debt bondage had increased to critical levels, and the aristocracy was accused of massively abusing their economic and social power. Solon enacted radical measures: he cancelled existing debts, prohibited loans on the security of the debtor's person (thus in fact abolishing debt bondage and guaranteeing the citizen's right to personal freedom), and realized a broad program of social, economic, and political reform. Many of his laws survived into the classical period. In some of his poems, which were probably performed at elite symposia rather than at public events, he expressed his sentiments, formulated his ideas, and justified his measures. It is primarily the evidence of these poems and laws which Aristotle, followed centuries later by Plutarch, used to construct his extant report on Solon's achievements.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> On Hesiod and the polis, see Peter Spahn, "Oikos und Polis: Beobachtungen zum Prozess der Polisbildung bei Hesiod, Solon und Aischylos", *Historische Zeitschrift* 231 (1980) 529–64; Paul Millett, "Hesiod and His World", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 30 (1984) 84–115; Raaflaub, "Homer to Solon" (*supra* n. 6) 59–64. On Hesiod's political reflection: Friedrich Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus* (Ithaca 1949, repr. 1995) part I; N. O. Brown, *Hesiod: Theogony* (Indianapolis 1953) 7–50; Richard Martin, "Hesiod, Odysseus, and the Instruction of Princes", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 114 (1984) 29–48; see also Havelock (*supra* n. 23) chapter 11; Michael Erler, "Das Recht (DIKE) als Segensbringerin für die Polis," *Studi Italiani di filologia classica* 3d ser. 5 (1987) 5–36; Gregory Nagy, *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (Ithaca 1990) chapter 3.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* (*Constitution of the Athenians*, henceforth *Ath. Pol.*) 5–12 [with the comments by Peter Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford 1981)]; Plutarch, *Life of Solon* [with the comments by Mario Manfredini and Luigi Piccirilli, *Plutarch, La vita di Solone* (Florence 1977)]; see also Herodotus 1.29–34 [which, however, contains little that is historically useful; see David Asheri, *Erodoto. Le storie. Libro I: La Lidia et la Persia* (Milan 1988)]. Solon's poems are collected in Martin L. West (ed.), *Iambi et Elegi Graeci Ante Alexandrum Cantati*, vol. II, second edition (Oxford 1992) and translated in West, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford 1993), which I cite here, though often modified; the laws in Eberhard Ruschenbusch, *Solonos Nomoi. Die Fragmente des solonischen Gesetzeswerkes mit*



Solon's reforms represent a milestone in Greek political thought. To our knowledge, he was the first to base his comprehensive legislation on a theoretical foundation and to derive his theory not primarily from ethical-religious but from truly political reflection. He formulated the main elements of his thought in a programmatic poem that ends with a praise of "good order" and is therefore usually entitled "*Eunomia*".<sup>33</sup>

The poem begins with a crucial statement: this is a song about "our community" (*hēmetera polis*); the issue is communal responsibility, and this responsibility lies only with the citizens! For indeed, as natural as it is for humans to blame misfortunes on the gods, the gods of Athens are supportive of their city and have nothing to do with its current troubles (1–4; cf. *Odyssey* 1.32–46, mentioned earlier). "It is the citizens themselves who in their folly seek to destroy the great polis, prompted by desire for wealth" (5–6). All citizens are guilty, but most of all the nobles ("leaders of the people"), whose injustice, excessive greed and *hybris* the poet criticizes in harsh words (7–14; cf. 4b, c West).

In pursuing their unjust ways, the nobles ignore the laws of Dike, the goddess of Justice. She,

the silent one, knows what is and has been done,  
and comes with certainty (*pantōs*) to claim the payment due –  
this aims an inescapable blow at the whole community,  
and soon it comes to wretched slavery  
which rouses war from sleep, and civil strife,  
and sunders many from their lovely youth (15–20).

In Hesiod Dike, Zeus' daughter, sits at her father's knees and, hoping to prompt him to act, complains about the injuries she has suffered on the part of corrupt human judges (*Works and Days* 256–62). Solon's Dike stands on her own. She will come with certainty; the suffering she causes is inescapable; it comes upon

*einer Text- und Überlieferungsgeschichte* (Wiesbaden 1966). On Solon's reforms in their historical context, see recently Antony Andrewes, "The Growth of the Athenian State", *Cambridge Ancient History*, second edition, vol. III.3 (Cambridge 1982) 360–91; Philip B. Manville, *The Origins of Citizenship in Ancient Athens* (Princeton 1990) chapters 5–6; Murray (*supra* n. 10) chapter 11; Raaflaub, "Solone, la nuova Atene e l'emergere della politica" in Salvatore Settis (ed.), *I Greci* II.1 (Turin 1996) 1035–81. On archaic legislation in general, Michael Gagarin, *Early Greek Law* (Berkeley 1986); Walter Eder, "The Political Significance of the Codification of Law in Archaic Societies" in Kurt A. Raaflaub (ed.), *Social Struggles in Archaic Rome* (Berkeley 1986) 262–300; Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, "Written Law in Archaic Greece", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 38 (1992) 87–117; *Schiedsrichter, Gesetzgeber und Gesetzgebung im archaischen Griechenland* (Stuttgart 1999).

<sup>33</sup> No. 4 in West, *Iambi et Elegi* (*supra* n. 32). See, e.g., Gregory Vlastos, "Solonian Justice," *Classical Philology* 41 (1946) 65–83. Repr. in id., *Studies in Greek Philosophy*, vol. I (Princeton 1955) 32–56; Friedrich Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus* (Ithaca NY, 1949, repr. 1995) 107–23; Werner Jaeger, *Five Essays* (Montreal 1966) 75–99; Michael Stahl, "Solon F 3D: Die Geburtsstunde des demokratischen Gedankens", *Gymnasium* 99 (1992) 385–408, and the bibliography cited there. In a broader context, Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (*supra* n. 2) chapter 3.

the entire community! Hesiod too postulates a connection between human injustice and divine retribution (e.g., *ibid.* 220–24, 258–62), but in the end he can do no more than hope: “I do not believe yet that Zeus’ wisdom will tolerate this” (273). Solon knows for certain because the consequences of human injustice, the retribution exacted on perpetrators and community alike, cannot only be postulated schematically (as Hesiod does in 225–47, perhaps referring to epic traditions) but are unmistakable reality, empirically proven, visible to everyone: in debt bondage, civil strife, civil war and tyranny – in short: in individual and collective loss of liberty (4.18–25 West). These were experiences suffered by many poleis in and before Solon’s time, and alarmingly were becoming part of Athens’ experience as well.<sup>34</sup> All this is generally valid, situated entirely on the political and social levels, tied into a logical chain of cause and effect, and therefore inescapable – just as thunder follows upon lightning (9 West). Political developments, Solon recognizes, follow predictable patterns, comparable to those that can be observed in nature.

If the entire city is affected, no citizen can escape:

And so the public ill comes home to every man:  
the yard doors are no more disposed to hold;  
it leaps the high wall, and it finds him out for sure (*pantōs*),  
though he take refuge in his inmost room (4.26–29 West).

Again Solon expresses complete certainty: the entire city will suffer. This allows him to go far beyond Hesiod, in two respects. First, Hesiod’s recommendation – to avoid the public and focus on the private sphere (one’s own farm and good relations with the neighbors: *Works and Days* 27–34, 342–52, cf. 493–501) – is, in Solon’s view, an illusion; in crisis and civil strife the private sphere offers no safe refuge. The solution rather lies in the opposite direction: in the citizens’ involvement in public affairs. Second, postulating that the causal connection between injustice and divine retribution was valid for the elite as well, despite their great resources, Hesiod had urged the noble leaders to change their ways and respect justice (202–85); but his appeal, based on trust in the gods, could only be effective if his belief was shared by those in power. Solon’s appeal is much more compelling because empirical observation confirms such causality: aristocratic abuse of power *does* result in civil strife and loss of power to a tyrant, evils that hurt the elite as much as anyone else. Since, then, the aristocracy can ill afford injustice, it is in their own best interest to return to the ways of justice.

Solon does not ignore divine power (Dike), but he finds it neither indispensable nor decisive in the socio-political processes he observes. In fact, one of his most significant discoveries is precisely that the causal connection between the actions of a group of citizens and the sufferings of a community can be explained sufficiently on the human level and does not depend on divine intervention. For

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Lintott, *Violence, Civil Strife and Revolution in the Classical City* (Baltimore 1982); Oswyn Murray (*supra* n. 10) chapter 9.

this connection is inherent in the conditions of social and political interaction within the community. In fact, it is comparable to the laws of nature:

As from the cloudbank comes the storm of snow or hail,  
and thunder follows from the lightning flash,  
exalted men portend the city's death; the folk  
in ignorance fall slave to tyranny.  
Raise them too high, and it's not easy afterwards  
to hold them down. Now's the time to read the signs  
(9, cf. 11 West).

His perception of such "laws of politics" gave Solon the confidence, in his assessment of social and political causality, to substitute certainty for belief: *pantōs*, "unfailingly", recurring in several crucial statements (see also 13.8, 28, 31 West), appears as a hallmark of his thought. Moreover, his insight enabled him to overcome a conception of justice that was widely influential in his time and linked to religious pollution and divine mystery; this conception, relying on oracles and experts in divination, had the effect of stifling the individual's ability to assume responsibility himself.<sup>35</sup> Solon's own thought led him in the opposite direction.

As we see in the poem's final section, the citizens are faced with a clear alternative: the "bad order" (*dysnomia*), the causes of which they know and under which they suffer, or *eunomia*, the "good order" *par excellence*, the exact opposite of the present situation, which Solon describes in enthusiastic poetic formulations (4.30–39 West). What this means politically emerges from other statements: the traditional order of the community is to be restored, strengthened and cleansed of faults and abuses; in this order the aristocracy holds power and provides leadership for the people, who in turn are protected from injustice by equitable laws. With great determination Solon rejects demands aiming at more incisive changes; he sets clear limits for and defends the interests of both sides:

The commons (*dēmos*) I have granted privilege enough,  
not lessening their estate nor giving more;  
the influential, who were envied for their wealth,  
I have saved them from all mistreatment too.  
I took my stand with strong shield covering both sides,  
allowing neither unjust dominance  
(5 West; cf. 6; 34.8–9; 36.22–23; 37).

On the other hand, if the entire political process takes place on a purely human level and within the polis community, only this community can find the necessary remedies, and it must do so in order to survive. Because all are harmed by the negative effects of wrongdoing, all must be involved in communal affairs and share political responsibility. In addition, new dimensions of civic action are now

<sup>35</sup> Gregory Vlastos, "Solonian Justice" (*supra* n. 33) 66–68.

available to them. Since it is possible to understand the causes and effects involved in socio-political processes, it must also be possible to use calculated intervention to change the course of such processes. Through legislation and institutional change the community thus has a chance to overcome or avoid crisis (*dysnomia*) and to restore and preserve peace and stability (*eunomia*). The citizen body (however it is composed and whoever is most influential in it) thus is enabled to determine the community's fate by themselves, in an informed way, consciously and responsibly.

## II

For the first time, therefore, political thought offered the opportunity to transcend powerless individual criticism of, or undirected collective revolt against, abuses and to stimulate constructive communal action toward institutional reform. I can provide here but a short summary of Solon's laws.

In his own account, Solon puts great emphasis on his legislation: "I wrote down ordinances for low and high alike (*homoioḗs*), providing straight justice fitted for each man" (36.18–20 West). This formulation, though using the less stringent term *homoios* ("similar") rather than *isos* ("equal"),<sup>36</sup> approximates the principle of equality before the law and must be considered fundamental for Solon's conception of community. It obviously was one of his priorities to establish certainty of law<sup>37</sup> and a broadly based system of justice that gave all citizens access to justice and involved large numbers of citizens in jurisdiction on important issues.<sup>38</sup> Fragments of, or references to, many laws survive in remarks and citations by later authors: Ruschenbusch lists no fewer than 93 items he considers authentic.<sup>39</sup> This large "accumulation of laws", however, is not to be confused with a systematic "codification of law",<sup>40</sup> and Franz Wieacker's characterization of the Roman *Twelve Tables* is valid for Solon's laws as well: "as an attempt at broad social pacification they focus on the critical aspects of daily economic and social life in the community."<sup>41</sup> What is remarkable, nevertheless, is the broad scope of Solon's effort to tackle these problems, and his attention to detail.<sup>42</sup>

The cancellation of debts and abolition of debt bondage, mentioned earlier, were the centerpieces of Solon's reform. They were flanked by other measures

<sup>36</sup> See, in general, F.D. Harvey, "Two Kinds of Equality", *Classica et Mediaevalia* 26 (1965) 101–46; Paul Cartledge, "Comparatively Equal" in Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (supra n. 28) 175–85.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Eder (supra n. 32).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Gregory Vlastos (supra n. 33); Havelock (supra n. 23) chapter 14.

<sup>39</sup> Eberhard Ruschenbusch (supra n. 32).

<sup>40</sup> Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp (supra n. 32).

<sup>41</sup> Franz Wieacker, *Vom römischen Recht* (Stuttgart 1944) 52.

<sup>42</sup> See Michael Gagarin (supra n. 32) especially chapter 3.

concerning economic and social life, which are often difficult to interpret because details and context are unknown to us: a law prohibiting the export of agricultural products except for oil (Plutarch, *Solon* 24.1), one restricting immigration to those meeting specific conditions (24.4), another obliging a son to support his father only if he had been taught a trade (22.1), regulations concerning the rights of heiresses (20.2, 4) or the writing of wills (21.3), detailed instructions concerning matters important for good relations among neighbors, and new specifications for measures and weights (which were much debated already in antiquity: 15.3–4; Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 10).<sup>43</sup>

In the political sphere too Solon did not provide comprehensive or systematic regulations, let alone a "constitution", but it is clear that his measures were incisive. He introduced (Plutarch, *Solon* 18.1–2) or, more likely, expanded and adapted a pre-existing (Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 7.3–4) division of the citizens into "classes" which, based on economic and, probably, military capacity, determined the citizens' political functions. Solon thus tied political participation to social status and substituted wealth for birth as the criterion determining access to political leadership, which made it more difficult for the established elite to monopolize power. This was a major change and introduced more openness into politics.<sup>44</sup>

The extant sources unanimously attribute to Solon the creation of a Council with 400 members which presumably was charged with preparing the Assembly's agenda and conducting preliminary deliberations on all or major issues (*probouleusis*); since no source gives specific information about its composition, responsibilities and actions before Cleisthenes replaced it by a larger "Council of 500", the historicity of this Solonian Council has often been doubted, but most scholars now seem to accept it (Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 8.4; Plutarch, *Solon* 19.1–2).<sup>45</sup> Although, as Andrewes observes,<sup>46</sup> "In Greek thought a probouleutic council is always a restraint on the sovereign assembly", its creation in itself must be understood as an effort to balance the power of the old aristocratic Areopagus Council, and could not fail to enhance the role and importance of the Assembly. It is thus natural to assume, despite the lack of evidence, that Solon at least minimally regulated the Assembly's meetings and responsibilities as well.<sup>47</sup> All citizens were allowed to attend (Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 7.3); that those of the lowest census class, the *thetes* who did not qualify for service in the city's army of heavily armed infantry (hoplites), were formally excluded is highly improbable, but it remains a possibility that speaking and perhaps voting were *de facto* tied to

<sup>43</sup> With the comments by Rhodes (*supra* n. 32); cf. Karl-Wilhelm Welwei, *Athen: vom neolithischen Siedlungsplatz zur archaischen Grosspolis* (Darmstadt 1992) 198–201.

<sup>44</sup> Elke Stein-Hölkeskamp, *Adelskultur und Polisgesellschaft* (Stuttgart 1989) especially 81–93.

<sup>45</sup> See the comments by Rhodes (*supra* n. 32); Manfredini and Piccirilli (*supra* n. 32); Welwei (*supra* n. 43), 190–92.

<sup>46</sup> Antony Andrewes (*supra* n. 32) 387.

<sup>47</sup> Rhodes (*supra* n. 32) 154.

a certain level of social prestige enjoyed only by those who owned enough property to serve as hoplites.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, Solon created a new popular court (*hēliaia*); rather than the Assembly sitting in a judicial capacity and deciding in serious cases on appeals against an archon's verdict, this perhaps was a separate body and court of first instance. Whichever was the case, the creation of this court established a system of justice in which a large number of citizens decided in public procedure about severe crimes affecting vital interests of the community.<sup>49</sup> Several specific laws aimed at enhancing the citizens' public responsibility even further. One introduced "the right for any person (*ho boulomenos*) to take legal action on behalf of an injured party". This right of "Popularklage", although probably limited to cases in which the injured party was unable to prosecute on his own account or was the community as a whole, was counted by Aristotle among the most progressive, "democratic" laws of Solon.<sup>50</sup> Another law seems to have been designed to protect the Athenian institutions against subversion, especially tyranny.<sup>51</sup> And a third law, the authenticity of which is much debated, established that anyone in a situation of civil strife (*stasis*) who refused to take sides should be outlawed;<sup>52</sup> this too probably was a measure primarily intended to prevent tyranny.

It is difficult to exaggerate Solon's achievement. In several respects his thought and actions were truly path-breaking. I focus on four points. First, as Aristotle observes (*Politics* 1285a29–b3), it was quite typical of archaic communities to appoint, in times of severe crisis, an "umpire" (*aisymnētēs*) or "mediator" (*diallaktēr*) who received full power and authority to restore peace and stability in the community.<sup>53</sup> Yet this should not blind us to the extraordinary

<sup>48</sup> Rhodes (*supra* n. 32) 140–41; Jochen Bleicken, *Die athenische Demokratie*, second edition (Paderborn 1994) 18; Raaflaub, "Power in the Hands of the People: Foundations of Athenian Democracy" in Ian Morris and Kurt Raaflaub (eds.), *Democracy 2500? Questions and Challenges* (Dubuque, Iowa, 1997) 41–44 and "The Thetes and Democracy", *ibid.*, 91–93.

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 9.1, with Rhodes (*supra* n. 32) 160–61; for further discussion, see Mogens H. Hansen, "The Athenian Heliia from Solon to Aristotle", *Classica et Mediaevalia* 33 (1981/82) 9–47; Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (Berkeley 1986) 9–12; Raphael Sealey, *The Athenian Republic: Democracy or the Rule of Law?* (University Park 1987) 60–70; Karl-Wilhelm Welwei (*supra* n. 43) 187–90.

<sup>50</sup> *Ath. Pol.* 9.1; Plutarch, Solon 18.6–7, with the comments by Rhodes (*supra* n. 32); Manfredini and Piccirilli (*supra* n. 32); cf. Eberhard Ruschenbusch, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des athenischen Strafrechts* (Colonge 1968) 47–53.

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 16.10 with Rhodes (*supra* n. 32) 156, 220–23; cf. Martin Ostwald, "The Athenian Legislation against Tyranny and Subversion", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 86 (1955) 103–28.

<sup>52</sup> Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 8.5 with Rhodes (*supra* n. 32) 157–58; Walter Eder (*supra* n. 32) 293; Welwei (*supra* n. 43) 171.

<sup>53</sup> Frank E. Romer, "The *Aisymnēteia*: A Problem in Aristotle's Historic Method," *American Journal of Philology* 103 (1982) 25–46; cf. Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (*supra* n. 2) 40–51.

nature of such a decision;<sup>54</sup> essentially, the community suspended and put at the disposal of one man its entire order, including the elite's traditional powers and prerogatives, property rights and means of social control. Of course, it was good to know that the method had worked elsewhere, and the person in question was scrutinized most carefully. Even so, the risk was immense, especially to the aristocracy. In Mytilene, for example, in a similar situation Pittacus ended up being "elected tyrant" by the demos<sup>55</sup> – which earned him the bitter hatred of an important faction among his fellow aristocrats who felt betrayed by him and never gave up their efforts to overthrow him.<sup>56</sup> Solon leaves no doubt that it would have been easy for him to do the same and, in fact, many expected it of him.<sup>57</sup> But he refused to take this route because his goal was to liberate and stabilize, not to enslave his community and cause further civil strife. His goal of *eunomia* was incompatible with greed and selfishness. He saw himself as standing in the middle,<sup>58</sup> fighting off unreasonable demands, denying victory to, and incurring the criticism of, both sides: "In accomplishing great things, it is difficult to please everybody!" (7 West). It was possible, he claims, to deflate the threat of civil war and revolution only by choosing a carefully balanced middle solution (36.20–27; 37 West). Balance and integration, then, are the hallmarks of Solon's work. His focus on the middle (*meson*), though essential for the Greek concept of community from early on, at the same time anticipates ideas that were fully developed in the late fifth and fourth centuries.<sup>59</sup>

Second, based on his understanding of the "laws of politics", Solon recognized that the citizens themselves had to take responsibility for the well-being of their community. In order to convey this message, he assumed the role of the teacher. Alcaeus and Theognis, members of the elite, addressed their fellow nobles and showed nothing but contempt for the demos. Hesiod, not a nobleman, tried to reach – and teach – his fellow peasants through the persona of his brother Perses but, convinced that the fate of the community really depended on the justice of the noble judges (*basileis*), he appealed to them as well. Solon, by contrast, consistently addresses the citizens at large, the demos, all: "My mind

<sup>54</sup> Walter Eder, "Polis und Politai. Die Auflösung des Adelsstaates und die Entwicklung des Polisbürgers" in Irma Wehgartner (ed.), *Euphronios und seine Zeit* (Berlin 1992) 26.

<sup>55</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 1285a 29–b3.

<sup>56</sup> Denys L. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford, 1955) 149–203; Wolfgang Rösler, *Dichter und Gruppe* (Munich 1980) 26–45.

<sup>57</sup> 33–35 West (*supra* n. 32); cf. Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 6.3–4, 11.2, 12.3; Plutarch, *Solon* 14.3–15.1.

<sup>58</sup> Nicole Loraux, "Solon au milieu de la lice" in *Aux origines de l'Hellénisme: La Crète et la Grèce. Hommages à Henri van Effenterre* (Paris 1984) 199–214.

<sup>59</sup> For *meson* as the space of communal activity, see Marcel Detienne, "En Grèce archaïque: Géométrie, politique et société", *Annales ESC* 20 (1965) 425–41; Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time in Greek Political Thought from the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato* (transl. David A. Cartis) (Atlantic Highlands NJ 1996). For the concept of *mesoi*, see Jacqueline de Romilly, *Problèmes de la démocratie grecque* (Paris 1975) 138–40; Ian Morris (*supra* n. 28) 19–48.

orders me to teach the Athenians!" (4.30 West). He chides their thoughtlessness, blindness and egotism; he tries to make them understand, appeals to their common experience and wants all of them to think about the common good as shrewdly as they do about their own *oikos* (11.5–8 West). Having thus created a "public universe of discourse",<sup>60</sup> Solon can then explain, by focusing on the themes of "common peace" and "common freedom", what it is that makes justice a matter of concern to every member of the community.

Third, in realizing his vision, Solon chose a carefully balanced position in the middle, between private and public interests, between the needs of *oikos* and polis. The powerful image of the public evil (*dēmosion kakon*), which leaps over the gate of the courtyard and finds even those hidden in the innermost chamber, makes clear that focus on the private sphere cannot protect the individual from harm. Common misery calls for common responses; if the community as a whole is threatened, the citizens have to get involved, on the Agora as on the battlefield. This explains Solon's efforts to strengthen the public sphere. On the other hand, the sanctity of the *oikos*, especially its inner chambers, still was a highly important concept centuries later.<sup>61</sup> Thus many of Solon's measures, from the cancellation of debts and liberation of debt bondsmen to regulations concerning heiresses, testaments, access to land and fountains, and similar matters, had precisely the purpose of strengthening the *oikos*, socially and economically. For Solon understood that communal peace, stability and prosperity depended on both the health of the *oikos* and the citizens' political vigor.

Fourth, although Solon urged his fellow citizens to assume political responsibility, his ideal was not, as some scholars assume, democratic;<sup>62</sup> in fact, it was rather conservative. Communal functions were based on economic and social status. He explicitly endorsed the traditional distribution of power in the community, and the right of active political participation may have been restricted *de facto* to the upper three census classes. But his measures provided protection to the lower class citizens, established certainty of law and equality before the law, made the political process more transparent, and encouraged political engagement and social mobility. Overall he initiated a process of political integration that decades later yielded results that probably would have far exceeded his imagination.

Moreover, through his political reforms Solon greatly enhanced, if not in fact created, a "political sphere" in the community, thereby establishing a permanent framework for political rather than private action and interaction as a means to resolving conflicts and reaching communal decisions. On the basis of the evidence available to us, it thus seems appropriate to connect the "discovery of

<sup>60</sup> Vlastos (*supra* n. 33) 68.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Spahn, "Oikos und Polis: Beobachtungen zum Prozess der Polisbildung bei Hesiod, Solon und Aischylos", *Historische Zeitschrift* 231 (1980) 545–50; cf. id., "Individualisierung und politisches Bewusstsein im archaischen Griechenland" in Raaflaub and Müller-Lückner (*supra* n. 27) 360–61.

<sup>62</sup> Robert W. Wallace, "Solonian Democracy" in Morris and Raaflaub (*supra* n. 48) 11–29.



politics" with Solon's name. It certainly is not accidental that precisely in the first half of the sixth century the area of the Agora was converted from a private to a public space and the first public buildings and cults were set up there.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, definitions of political rights and responsibilities, as similarly the guaranteed right of personal freedom brought about by the abolition of debt bondage, made it necessary to determine who was entitled to share in such privileges. These were significant prerogatives, causing pride and distinction and thus not easily bestowed upon any person who happened to settle in the polis. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the notion of citizenship emerged in the same context as well, though probably in a very preliminary form.<sup>64</sup>

Solon, then, appears not only as political thinker, reconciler and lawgiver, but also as the man whose initiative and insight contributed decisively to delimiting a political sphere in the polis, increasing the importance of politics, formulating new principles of political ethics and civic responsibility, defining citizen status, creating a "citizen state", and advancing "statehood".<sup>65</sup> In his case, political thought was instrumental in recognizing the causes of a deep political crisis, in establishing direct and generally valid connections between civic responsibility and the well-being of the community, and in devising measures to overcome the crisis and restore communal peace and stability. As it turned out, Solon's solutions, perhaps reaching too far ahead of their time, failed to secure these goals permanently – in fact, renewed elite rivalry eventually resulted in several decades of tyranny which, paradoxically, proved crucial in preparing the community for its later adoption of more egalitarian structures.<sup>66</sup> After the fall of tyranny, a brief return of elite stasis, Spartan interference and demotic revolt, it was precisely the principle Solon propagated, that the citizens themselves had to take charge of the community, which was realized in the set of reforms connected with the name of Cleisthenes. These reforms, themselves an impressive document for political reflection, enhanced equality among the citizens, made the demos present in the processes of decision making through a complex scheme of representation, and balanced traditional aristocratic power and leadership by increasing the role of the citizens in Assembly and Council.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> On the "discovery of politics", see generally Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (*supra* n. 2) 29–52; cf. 20–25; Stahl (*supra* n. 33) 399–401, and, on "the political", Paul Cartledge, "La politica" in Salvatore Settis (ed.), *I Greci I* (Turin 1996) especially 42–45. Agora: Homer A. Thompson and R. E. Wycherley, *The Agora of Athens* (Princeton 1972) 16, 19–20; John M. Camp, *The Athenian Agora* (London 1986) 37–39; now challenged by Albert J. Ammerman, "The Eridanos Valley and the Athenian Agora", *American Journal of Archaeology* 100 (1996) 699–715.

<sup>64</sup> Manville (*supra* n. 32) chapter 6; id., "Toward a New Paradigm of Athenian Citizenship" in Alan L. Boegehold and Adele Scafuro (eds.), *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology* (Baltimore 1994) 21–33; Frank J. Frost, "Aspects of Early Athenian Citizenship", *ibid.* 45–56. Raphael Sealey, "How Citizenship and the City Began in Athens", *American Journal of Ancient History* 8 (1983) 97–129 argues for a much later date.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Stahl, *Aristokraten und Tyrannen im archaischen Athen* (Stuttgart 1987) 170–81, 190–93.

<sup>66</sup> Stahl (*supra* n. 65) 188–89; Eder (*supra* n. 54) 24–38.

<sup>67</sup> For recent discussions of Cleisthenes' reforms, see Martin Ostwald, "The Reform of the

Cleisthenes' system succeeded in unifying the Athenian polis and was a crucial precondition not only for the Athenians' determination and ability to resist and defeat the Persians in 490 and 480/79 but also for their ability, in the exceptional conditions of the post-Persian War period, to introduce further constitutional changes which realized democracy to the fullest extent possible in the ancient world.<sup>68</sup> This long development began with Solon. Although his achievement made none of it inevitable, without his vision, courage and determination Athens might have taken a different route.

Almost two hundred years after Solon, the Athenian polis again plunged into a deep crisis that resulted in political turmoil, civil strife, and constitutional change. The question that remains to be examined is what role political thought played in that crisis and to what extent it was able to help overcome it. The late fifth century is one of the best-documented periods in Greek history; a great variety of sources survive, permitting a more detailed historical and political analysis.

### 3. Political Thought and the Crisis of the Polis

#### I

In June of 411 B.C. the citizens of Athens were called to an assembly on the Kolonos Hippios, a little sanctuary outside the city.<sup>69</sup> The place and agenda of this meeting were unusual. It was war, and the Spartans controlled the Attic

Athenian State by Cleisthenes" in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. IV, second edition (Cambridge 1988) 303–46; Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (*supra* n. 2) chapter 4; Manville (*supra* n. 32) chapter 7; Josiah Ober, "The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 BCE: Violence, Authority, and the Origins of Democracy" in Carol Dougherty and Leslie Kurke (eds.), *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece* (Cambridge 1993) 215–32 (Repr. in Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* [Princeton 1996] 32–52); "Revolution Matters: Democracy as Demotic Action" in Morris and Raaflaub (*supra* n. 32) 67–85; Nicole Loraux, "Clistene e i nuovi caratteri della Lotta politica" in Settis (*supra* n. 32) 1083–1110; Raaflaub (*supra* n. 48) 39–44, 91–95; Greg Anderson, *The Athenian Experiment: Building Political Community in Ancient Attica, ca. 509–490 BC* (forthcoming).

<sup>68</sup> On the reforms of 462–50, connected with the names of Ephialtes and Pericles, see Christian Meier, "Der Umbruch zur Demokratie in Athen (462/1 v. Chr.);" in Reinhart Herzog and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewusstsein* (Munich 1987) 353–80; Charles W. Fornara and Loren J. Samons II, *Athens from Cleisthenes to Pericles* (Berkeley 1991) 58–75; Peter Rhodes, "The Athenian Revolution" in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. V, second edition (Cambridge 1992) 67–77; Raaflaub (*supra* n. 48) 44–53, 95–101. On the development and working of Athenian democracy, see Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton 1989); Mogens H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Oxford 1991); Jochen Bleicken (*supra* n. 48).

<sup>69</sup> A much expanded and richly annotated version of this section was published in German in Raaflaub, "Politisches Denken und Krise der Polis. Athen im Verfassungskonflikt des späten 5. Jh. v. Chr.," *Historische Zeitschrift* 255 (1992) 1–60 (with acknowledgements listed in n.1).

countryside. The military situation of Athens was critical. Upon a motion by an emergency advisory board, appointed a few days earlier, a bill was passed that any citizen might propose with impunity whatever measure he considered helpful, and that heavy penalties should be imposed upon those trying to apply any means of obstruction, including the usual protections of the democratic constitution. Then the democratic principles of appointment by lot and pay for civil offices were abolished, active citizen rights limited to the five thousand wealthiest Athenians, and procedures put in place for appointing a new Council with autocratic power, comprising four hundred members, that was to replace the democratic council of Five Hundred (Thuc. 8.67; Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 29.4–5).

Thus democracy voted itself out of power. The way was free for the oligarchy of the Four Hundred. What had made this possible? In 415 the Athenians had been seduced into sending a large force to Sicily, hoping to tip decisively the balance of power in their long drawn-out struggle with Sparta – the so-called Peloponnesian War. Instead, this force was destroyed in the fall of 413 and Athens' power crucially damaged.<sup>70</sup> Sparta exploited this opportunity on all fronts. Despite determined efforts the situation of Athens deteriorated further, particularly when the Persians began to pay large subsidies to Sparta.

Under these conditions discontent with democracy, long simmering in the *hetaireiai* (social and political associations maintained by the elite) grew rapidly. In 415 two shocking religious scandals involving numerous members of such *hetaireiai* shook the city; they were interpreted as symptoms of an oligarchic conspiracy.<sup>71</sup> Oligarchic tendencies openly manifested themselves first among the officers of the fleet stationed on Samos. Such tendencies were further encouraged by the intrigues of Alcibiades who had escaped to Sparta to avoid a trial for involvement in those scandals, and who then supported the Spartans against his own polis, and now was trying to engineer his return to Athens. He promised to bring the Persians over to the Athenian side if in Athens the democracy, now dangerous to his safety and career, was replaced by an oligarchy.

Hence I cite here mostly bibliog. published in the 1990s. For the historical events from 415 to 411, see Thucydides, bks. 6–8 with the introduction and comments by Arnold W. Gomme, Antony Andrewes and Kenneth J. Dover, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, vols. IV–V, (Oxford 1970/1981); Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 29–34 with the comments by Rhodes (*supra* n. 32); Plutarch, *Alcibiades, Nicias*; furthermore Lintott (*supra* n. 34) chapter 4; Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law* (Berkeley 1986) chapters 6–7; Mark Munn, *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley 2000). For the events from the regime of the 5000 to the end of the war, Donald Kagan, *The Fall of the Athenian Empire* (Ithaca NY 1987); Bruno Bleckmann, *Athens Weg in die Niederlage. Die letzten Jahre des Peloponnesischen Krieges* (Stuttgart 1998).

<sup>70</sup> Donald Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (Ithaca 1981); Antony Andrewes, "The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition" in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. V, second edition (Cambridge 1992) 446–63.

<sup>71</sup> Arnold W. Gomme, Antony Andrewes and Kenneth J. Dover (*supra* n. 69) IV. 264–90; Douglas M. MacDowell, *Andokides, On the Mysteries: Edited with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford 1962); William D. Furley, *Andokides and the Herms: A Study of Crisis in Fifth-Century Athenian Religion* (London 1996).

Insisting that the city could not afford to rebuff this offer, exploiting the absence of large parts of the democratic masses who were serving on the fleet stationed in Samos, and using the *hetaireiai* to frighten the supporters of democracy into submission by a veritable campaign of terror, the oligarchs finally broke their resistance. As a result, the assembly on the Kolonos accepted the establishment of an oligarchic regime.

Nevertheless, Athens' military situation did not improve. The promised Persian support did not materialize, and the oligarchs' hope for a favorable agreement with Sparta proved wrong. Although on the fleet in Samos the democrats soon regained control, in Athens the hard core of the oligarchs strove to preserve their power by all means, including terror, murder, and treason. Such tendencies eventually provoked the resistance of a group of moderates, led by Theramenes. Already in the fall of 411, in the aftermath of various setbacks that threatened Athens' very survival, the Four Hundred were overthrown and replaced by a moderate oligarchy nominally based on five thousand full citizens. Yet this regime too proved short-lived. The navy, on its own initiative, had recalled Alcibiades and installed him as a general; in the spring of 410 it won several important victories. As a result, democracy was fully restored in Athens.

Thus in little more than one year the Athenians, faced with an increasingly critical military situation, suffered through a deep political crisis resulting in three changes of constitution and several serious domestic struggles that more than once almost turned into open civil war.

## II

So much for the historical context. Earlier, soon after 424, Euripides had presented his tragedy, *The Suppliant Women*.<sup>72</sup> The suppliants are the mothers of the "Seven against Thebes", who fought with Polynices to regain for him the throne of Oedipus against the usurpation of his brother Eteocles. The Seven are dead; the Thebans have refused to allow their burial. Their mothers ask Theseus, king of Athens, for help. After much discussion Theseus decides in favor of military intervention and achieves the release of the dead for burial. In Athens Adrastus, king of Argos, under whose patronage the Seven marched against Thebes, delivers a funeral oration praising the virtues of the dead heroes.

As is typical of Athenian tragedy, this one too is multifaceted and pursues various strands of thought. On one level, it offers, in a confrontation between Theseus and a Theban herald, a detailed debate about democracy, comparable to a more famous piece in Herodotus (3.80–82). As democracy's positive achieve-

<sup>72</sup> For date and interpretation, see especially Günther Zuntz, *The Political Plays of Euripides* (Manchester 1955); Christopher Collard, *Euripides. Suppliants: Edition, Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (Groningen 1975); Peter Burian, "Logos and Pathos: The Politics of the *Suppliant Women*" in id. (ed.), *Directions in Euripidean Criticism: A Collection of Essays* (Durham, NC 1985) 129–55; Ann Michelini, "Political Themes in Euripides' *Suppliants*" *American Journal of Philology* 115 (1994) 219–52.

ments Theseus praises the liberty and sovereignty of the people, the political and legal equality of all citizens, and the harmony of life in family and polis that benefits the entire community, while the herald criticizes the abuses facilitated by mass rule: the detrimental influence of demagogues relying on rhetoric and shunning responsibility for their proposals, and, on the part of the demos, the lack of competence, informed and critical judgement, and consistency (399–455).<sup>73</sup>

In another passage Theseus condemns Adrastus for having led his polis into disaster, seduced by greed and hybris and by young hotheads who out of selfish ambition drive their communities into war and “never think what harms this brings for the majority” (229–37). But the citizens are no less to blame: the rich and the poor think only of themselves; only those in the middle present a force that can save the city (238–45). By contrast, Adrastus’ funeral oration praises the dead heroes as models of civic virtue and as leaders who cared only about the common weal (857–908) – a characterization that blatantly contradicts the traditional image of those heroes. Obviously Euripides, as he often does, has here changed the myth with great liberty. Such changes, of course, are not accidental. Rather, they direct our attention to concerns that the poet considered particularly important.<sup>74</sup>

In this case, the main problems besetting the polis are that in democracy the politicians selfishly lead the people astray, and the people are incapable of resisting such tendencies and making competent decisions. What can be done? The poet sees the solution primarily in strengthening the citizens’ sense of communal responsibility and in preparing the young carefully for their function as citizens. The civic virtues praised in the dead heroes, and culminating in selfless bravery on the battlefield, can be acquired by every citizen – if he trains himself accordingly: “To be well brought up develops self-respect: anyone who has practiced what is good is ashamed to turn out badly. Courage is teachable, just as a child is taught to say and hear matters not yet understood; things learnt in youth are often stored till old age; therefore give sound training to the young” (911–17).<sup>75</sup>

In a scene filled with high pathos and topical significance the spectators hardly failed to notice the seriousness of this appeal. Yet is this a satisfactory proposal? Can an appeal to enhance communal spirit and responsibility and to educate the young carefully, that is, to improve the *moral* makeup of the citizens – can such a moral appeal be considered an adequate response to serious criticism of democracy and thus to a *political* problem? How is it possible to consider the personal and moral side more important than the political and institutional one?

<sup>73</sup> See Jochen Bleicken, “Zur Entstehung der Verfassungstypologie im 5. Jh. v. Chr.,” *Historia* 28 (1979) 158–60; Raaflaub, “Contemporary Perceptions of Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 40 (1989) 33–70, esp. 41–46.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Burian (*supra* n. 72) 147.

<sup>75</sup> Christopher Collard, “The Funeral Oration in Euripides’ *Suppliants*,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 19 (1972) 39–53.

Similar thoughts recur often in Euripides' oeuvre. I mention only one example, the *Phoenician Women*, performed soon after the upheavals of 411/10. The play deals with the same myth: shortly before the Seven begin their attack on Thebes, Iocasta tries to reconcile her two sons, Eteocles and Polynices. She fails because both strive for absolute power and are deaf to appeals urging moderation or communal responsibility. In this case too Euripides finds a solution to a highly political problem precisely in enhancing the moral sense of communal responsibility (see below, at n. 86). According to an old prophecy, the city can be saved only if a prince of royal descent placates divine anger by sacrificing his life. While Eteocles and Polynices kill each other in their blind struggle for power, young Menoeceus throws himself off the wall and secures victory for the Theban army. If simple soldiers, he says, give their lives for their city without much fuss, how can he, called upon by the gods, betray his family and community? If everyone were prepared to sacrifice his most valuable possession, the Greek polis would not suffer so much harm (991–1018).

### III

Thus Euripides seems to take a moral, not strictly a political approach to coping with problems that appear to us primarily or essentially political. Objections – that, as a poet, Euripides might not be a competent judge of the political problems envisaged, or that tragedy might not be the right vehicle for political discussions – are easily refuted: political thought featured prominently already in Aeschylus' and Sophocles' tragedies, and political problems as well as the main components of contemporary political thought are dealt with frequently and intensely in Euripides' plays. His criticism of democracy corresponds closely to arguments expressed by other authors in his time.<sup>76</sup> The questions he raises – how best to educate the young citizens or how to balance individual ambition and justice or private and public obligations, and thus also how to enhance civic responsibility and loyalty to the community – these questions were among those most intensely discussed at the time.

One might further object that – at least in the *Phoenician Women* – the basic conflict between selfish ambition (at the expense of the community) and selfless sacrifice (for its benefit) is a priori set in moral terms, and that in Euripides' time people were not used to distinguishing sharply between ethics and politics. Such objections should be taken seriously; I shall return to them later. At this point I merely want to emphasize that on the whole in the extant fifth-century sources there is remarkably little talk of specifically political and institutional solutions to the crisis of democracy. While this is to some extent understandable, because

<sup>76</sup> On tragedy and politics see recently Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy* (Baltimore 1993); Patricia Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1997); Christopher Pelling (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford 1997); Suzanne Said, "Tragedy and Politics" in Deborah Boedeker and Kurt A. Raaflaub (eds.), *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens* (Cambridge MA, 1998) 275–95. For surveys of 5th-century political thought, see *supra* n. 2. 273–368.

attempts to tamper with the principles of democracy were liable to drastic penalties,<sup>77</sup> it is also quite astonishing. After all, not only were jokes about and criticism of democracy easily tolerated,<sup>78</sup> we also know that discussions of democracy were frequent<sup>79</sup> and, most importantly, that the intellectual and theoretical premises to work out political solutions did exist at the time.

For Greek political thought reached a first climax precisely in the late fifth century. As said in the introduction to this essay, Greek "political thought" was interested broadly in the conditions and relationships within the human community and in a wide range of issues, including moral ones, that were considered as important for the well-being of the polis as political institutions and decisions. Thus there was an old tradition linking moral and political concerns. Political thought became more specifically "political" only when, in the sixth and fifth centuries, there emerged a distinct political sphere within the polis. This development was accelerated in Athens by the marked intensification of political life brought about by the empire and democracy. Under the influence of these profound changes Aeschylus and Sophocles used traditional myths to dramatize, and thereby to think and work through, some of the difficult problems that their community had to face. Thus several of their tragedies are, among many other things, important monuments of a differentiated but not specialized type of political thought which we later find also in the works of Euripides and Thucydides.

In addition, the dominant role of the assembly and popular courts in democracy created new needs and new conditions for political action. More than ever the influence of the individual depended on his ability to persuade. The traditional aristocratic education failed to meet those needs; new subject matters and new methods of teaching were required, and a new category of professional thinkers and teachers emerged: the sophists.<sup>80</sup> They taught the principles and skills of rhetoric and politics, and laid the foundations of the corresponding sciences; they discussed many important aspects of political life intensely, sometimes theoretically, and often in radical opposition to conventional views. Thus the sophists went far beyond the traditional parameters of political thought; they became the founders or forerunners of political theory. Their influence on the intellectual and political life of Athens can hardly be overestimated; the achievements of Plato and Aristotle are unthinkable without their groundwork.

Greek political thought had always been concerned with the practical problems of the community. In marked contrast to the abstract speculations of the

<sup>77</sup> Martin Ostwald, "The Athenian Legislation against Tyranny and Subversion", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 86 (1955) 103-28; Jochen Bleicken, "Verfassungsschutz im demokratischen Athen", *Hermes* 112 (1984) 383-401.

<sup>78</sup> Jeffery Henderson, "Attic Old Comedy, Frank Speech, and Democracy" in Boedeker and Raaflaub (*supra* n. 76) 255-73.

<sup>79</sup> Raaflaub 1989 (*supra* n. 73).

<sup>80</sup> William K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. III (Cambridge 1969) Part I; George B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge 1981); Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens* (Oxford 1992); Robert W. Wallace, "The Sophists in Athens" in Boedeker and Raaflaub (*supra* n. 76) 203-22.

natural philosophers, the sophists' discussions too served a concrete purpose: to enable the politicians to prevail and to master the challenges of daily politics. Moreover, in the late fifth century it was common to analyze and compare the characteristics of various constitutions, and to do so, at least in part, by applying political theories; the advantages and disadvantages of democracy were attacked and defended vigorously, and it is likely that some thinkers used the results of such discussions in designing new constitutions (thus Protagoras in Thuri) or in drawing up abstract and ideal constitutions (thus Hippodamus of Miletus).

We should expect therefore that in the crisis of democracy as well political thought or theory was able to suggest practical solutions. Yet apart from the emergency measures of 413 (below) and possibly the law that permitted the prosecution of a citizen for having proposed an unlawful decree (*graphē paranomōn*),<sup>81</sup> there is no institutional confirmation, and there is no evidence for an *objective* and *constructive* debate about democracy. Thus the question is inevitable why, except possibly for Protagoras (Plato, *Protagoras* 320c–322d), nobody seems to have tried seriously not only to found the democratic idea on sound theoretical principles but to create, on the basis of democratic ideals, a better constitution that was free of its well-known weaknesses, and why, as our sources reveal, the constitutional debates were largely influenced by traditional social and moral prejudices.<sup>82</sup>

For in the judgment of its opponents democracy was the self-interested rule of incompetent and inferior masses that lacked in every respect the qualities needed to participate in government. It could at best be justified by its military successes in the past and the regrettable reliance of Athens on the fleet. But democracy had obvious practical flaws, and it intolerably restricted the chances and influence of the "better ones" who alone possessed the qualities needed to bear political responsibility. Thus being "a patent absurdity"<sup>83</sup> and flawed in principle, not just in part, democracy could not be improved but only abolished entirely and replaced by something radically different and better (thus for example the "Old Oligarch": Pseudo-Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians* 1.1–9). The supporters of democracy repudiated such criticism. They claimed that their system allowed all citizens to share political responsibility freely and equally, according to their wishes and abilities; they insisted on institutional advantages and protections, and on the legitimacy accruing to democracy by its undeniable successes. Thus at least on their side the premises existed for a discussion focusing on political and institutional arguments.

The news of the Sicilian disaster jeopardized all of these positive claims: democracy was no longer legitimized by success, and its flaws had become all

<sup>81</sup> Though not attested before 415, this law was possibly introduced much earlier: for discussion, see C. Hignett, *A History of the Athenian Constitution to the End of the Fifth Century BC* (Oxford 1952) 209–13; Hans Julius Wolff, "Normenkontrolle" und Gesetzesbegriff in der attischen Demokratie. *Sitzungsberichte Heidelberger Akademie* 1970 no. 2 (Heidelberg): Bleicken (*supra* n. 48) 327–29.

<sup>82</sup> Bleicken (*supra* n. 73); Raaflaub (*supra* n. 73).

<sup>83</sup> Alcibiades in Sparta: Thuc. 6.89.6.



too visible. In the fall of 413, in addition to professing their intention to use financial and political discipline, the Athenians appointed a committee of ten *probouloi* ("pre-deliberators") with extraordinary powers (*autokratores*) who were to play an important role in decision making (Thuc. 8.1). Thus the citizens were willing to moderate democratic practices. As the crisis progressed, discussions intensified and the willingness increased to consider deeper changes in the political system (Thuc. 8.47–49, 53–54, 66).<sup>84</sup> Even the democratic masses were forced by the military emergency to face the possibility of abolishing some of the sacrosanct principles of democracy. Thus changes in constitutional thought and structure became possible; for fifty years conditions had not been so favorable for constructive debate and change based on broad consensus and the interests of the entire community.

Instead, in 411 democracy was replaced by a radical oligarchy. The opportunity of broad-based renewal was wasted; instead, polarization in thought and action increased massively. The question is, why? What were the motives and goals of those involved? How did contemporaries experience the developments of 411? Was the situation really open or were the positions fixed from the beginning? If so, why? What was, in that context, the relation between political thought and action, theory and practice? What did political thought contribute to resolving the crisis?

Those who know Thucydides' report on the events might consider these questions superfluous. But Thucydides was a historian, not an archivist. His unfinished eighth book clearly shows the traces of his research and interpretation.<sup>85</sup> We should not feel bound by his opinion unless we can confirm it by independent evidence – which, fortunately, is not lacking. Thus I shall first analyze the sources closest in time to the events (tragedies, speeches, constitutional documents) as well as the attitudes of the politicians involved, then compare the resulting picture with Thucydides' presentation, and finally attempt to sketch at least a brief explanation of this picture.

#### IV

I begin, then, by examining the contemporary evidence. First, in his *Phoenician Women*, Euripides has turned the meeting of Iocasta, Eteocles and Polynices into a debate about two opposing political principles. Since Eteocles has broken the brothers' agreement to take turns in ruling, Polynices' action initially appears understandable: his cause is just (154–55, 319, 369–70), he fights his city against his will (433–34), and he is ready to accept any fair compromise (435–42, 469–93). Eteocles, by contrast, presents himself as a selfish tyrant, obsessed by excessive ambition. Equality, he says, is but an empty word; he would risk anything in order to seize the greatest goddess of all: power, tyranny. "If one must

<sup>84</sup> Ostwald (*supra* n. 69) 353–54, 367–68.

<sup>85</sup> Gomme, Andrewes and Dover (*supra* n. 69), vol. V, 1–4, 369–75.

do a wrong, it's best to do it pursuing power – otherwise, let's have virtue" (499–525). Iocasta, trying to refute such ambition and to promote the advantages of equality (528–58), fails to shake his resolve.

Scholars have identified the brothers with specific politicians or seen in them the embodiment of the main characteristics of democracy and oligarchy. More probably the poet is concerned with the fundamental problem that in domestic struggles both sides tend to take their claims for absolutes, to set their partisan interests above the common good and thus to harm their community.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, at the end Polynices, too, does not renounce the use of force (625–35). Facing the alternative of ruling or saving Thebes, both brothers choose to fight for sole power, thus risking the destruction of their polis (559–85). The ideal of equality, promoted by Iocasta, then probably should be seen not as a specifically democratic value but more generally as one that prohibits exclusive control of power by individuals or groups and permits the political involvement of all citizens to the benefit of the community. It thus seems plausible that the poet recognized, as the main problem haunting Athens in 411/10, an excessive and utterly selfish desire for power that induced many politicians to completely disregard the needs and interests of their community.

Second, a fragment survives of the self-defense of the orator Antiphon of Rhamnus, the head and brilliant planner of the oligarchic coup of 411 (Thuc. 8.68.1–2).<sup>87</sup> After the fall of the Four Hundred but still under the regime of the Five Thousand he was tried and executed for treason. His accusers who initially had been among the Four Hundred themselves understandably did not focus on Antiphon's role in the oligarchy.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, as the preserved fragment indicates,<sup>89</sup> Antiphon defended himself on that score as well.

The orator lists a number of motives that might be stressed profitably in such a situation, among them fear of a trial for corruption or anger because of a conviction in the democratic courts. "Those are reasons which lead some to desire a change of government, so that they may avoid paying for misdeeds which they have committed, or else gain redress for wrongs which they have suffered and prevent their recurrence. But no such motive was at work in my case." Even professionally, Antiphon adds, as writer of court speeches, he did much better under the democracy than under the oligarchy. Why then, he concludes, "should I have desired an oligarchic government? Am I incapable of appreciating these facts for myself? Am I the one man in Athens who cannot see where his own advantage lies?" (tr. Maidment).

<sup>86</sup> Jacqueline de Romilly, "Phoenician Women of Euripides: Topicality in Greek Tragedy", *Bucknell Review* 15 (1967) 108–32; Elisabeth Rawson, "Family and Fatherland in Euripides' *Phoenissae*", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 11 (1970) 111–27; Suzanne Said, "Tragedy and Politics" in Boedeker and Raaflaub (supra n. 76) 290–94.

<sup>87</sup> Ostwald (supra n. 69) 359–64.

<sup>88</sup> Ernst Heitsch, *Antiphon aus Rhamnus* (Stuttgart 1984) 113–21.

<sup>89</sup> "On the Revolution," fr. B 1.2 in Kenneth J. Maidment, *Minor Attic Orators* vol. 1 Loeb Classical Library no. 308, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library no. 308 (Cambridge, MA 1941) 294–97.

We might not be impressed by such statements. Moreover, we do not know what else Antiphon said on this subject. But we do find similar remarks in two speeches of Lysias, one from 410, the other from shortly after 403. Lysias emphasizes that no one is an oligarch or democrat by nature (*physei*); rather, he promotes the system that best suits his interests. Political polarizations are caused not by constitutional issues but by those of personal advantage. Thus one finds among those supporting a change from democracy to oligarchy only persons who under the democratic regime have suffered personal damage and disappointment (Lys. 25.7–12).

Whatever their truth, these statements at least prove that such arguments were considered plausible and effective. Thus personal advantage and dissatisfaction were presented as the only realistic motives for supporting a change of constitution. Political considerations, such as the failure or basic insufficiency of a political system and the need to change it for the good of the entire community, seem to have been secondary at best, hardly worth mentioning – even if, as in the case of Antiphon's trial, political conditions would have permitted the use of such arguments.

Third, further testimony is offered by the institutions. Between the overthrow and the restoration of democracy two constitutions were tried; if we can trust Aristotle, two more were at least discussed.<sup>90</sup> All these were oligarchic models, because in all of them the main principles of democracy (active citizenship of all adult Athenians, appointment of most officials by lot, and pay for civil offices) were abolished. By limiting the class of active citizens first to the five thousand wealthiest, then to the hoplite class, the lowest census class of the thetes was completely excluded. Even so, the real goal of the oligarchs was not a moderate regime but the exclusive rule of the Four Hundred.

Thus the oligarchies of 411/10 were characterized by claims to absolute power and exclusiveness. When the democracy was restored, however, similar issues were emphasized:<sup>91</sup> democracy was protected by even stronger laws and further "radicalized" by strengthening the powers of Assembly and law courts at the expense of the Council; those among the Four Hundred who had not joined the moderates under Theramenes early enough were put to trial; and large parts of the hoplite class who had not actively participated in overthrowing the Four Hundred were punished collectively by partial disenfranchisement. The wounds caused by such excessive measures haunted the community for a long time.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Ath. Pol. 29–33 with Rhodes (*supra* n. 32) 362–69 and comments, 369–414; Gomme, Andrewes and Dover (*supra* n. 69), vol. V, 212–40; Ostwald (*supra* n. 69) 373–84. More bibliography in Raaflaub, "Politisches Denken und Krise der Polis. Athen im Verfassungskonflikt des späten 5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.," *Historische Zeitschrift* 255 (1992) 24 n.62.

<sup>91</sup> Ostwald (*supra* n. 69) 412–22; Kagan (*supra* n.69) chapter 10.

<sup>92</sup> Aristophanes, *Frogs* 686–736. The events of 411 in turn certainly represented at least partly a reaction to those of 415 when, as a result of the religious scandals mentioned above many elite Athenians had lost their property, citizenship, or life (Gomme, Andrewes and Dover [*supra* n. 69], vol. IV, esp. 276–88; Ostwald [*supra* n. 69] 329–30, 537–50).

In short, even in a crisis in which the survival of the polis was at stake constitutional thought was dominated by exclusive claims to power and a sharp polarization between democrats and oligarchs. Except for the introduction of the *probouloi* institutional changes served only the purpose of protecting the current system, securing the power of those who ruled, and excluding the others.

Fourth, a brief look at the behavior and motives of individual politicians will confirm this conclusion. Of course, the explanations cited by Antiphon and Lysias are superficial and simplistic. Unfortunately, we know so little about most persons involved in these events – for example, we have the names of only twenty-nine among the Four Hundred – that it is impossible to make general statements.<sup>93</sup> Yet we have some evidence to prove that opportunism and self-interest tended to prevail over communal concerns. The example of Alcibiades is well known.<sup>94</sup> The case of Phrynichus, one of the hawks among the Four Hundred, is no less illustrative. Having opposed the recall of Alcibiades, he was afraid of the latter's revenge and did all he could to prevent his return. With his intrigues he consciously risked the failure of the potential alliance with Persia that seemed so important for Athens' survival; he even went so far as to reveal to a Spartan admiral the Athenian positions on Samos, adding that he wished to be excused "if he sought to harm his enemy even at the expense of the interests of his country" (Thuc. 8.50–51; cit. 50.2).

The information culled from a broad range of contemporary evidence thus is entirely consistent. It confirms Thucydides' own assessment impressively. He was aware that the critical situation of Athens provided the oligarchs with strong political arguments to justify the constitutional change they favored. Thus he lets them emphasize that the oligarchy was intended to save the city and protect the interests of all (8.72.1; cf. 53.3, 86.3);<sup>95</sup> that it was a constitution of reason, moderation and good order (8.53.3, 64.4–5); and that it justly gave the power to those citizens who were sacrificing most for the city and bearing the greatest risks materially as well as physically (8.48.1; cf. 63.4; Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 29.5).

Yet, as Thucydides' account (8.45–98) documents, the terminology used by the oligarchs (and reflecting their thinking) is dominated by the traditional moral prejudices of the upper classes against the lower.<sup>96</sup> Those who were interested in incisive constitutional changes discussed only the oligarchic alternative; thus on their part constitutional thought was not open at all. Unlike their words, their actions aimed only at establishing and protecting by every means their control of power and exclusive rule over the city. Even within their group selfishness and ruthless ambition prevailed. When their situation got precarious, at least the hard core of the Four Hundred, in blatant contradiction to their earlier pronouncements, pushed for peace with Sparta, willing not only to make far-reaching concessions

<sup>93</sup> Ostwald (*supra* n. 69) especially 348–53, 359–66, 391–93.

<sup>94</sup> Walter M. Ellis, *Alcibiades* (London 1989); Munn (*supra* n. 69) chapter 4.

<sup>95</sup> Edmond Lévy, *Athènes devant la défaite de 404: Histoire d'une crise idéologique* (Paris 1976) 16–27.

<sup>96</sup> Walter Donlan, *The Aristocratic Ideal in Ancient Greece* (*supra* n. 29) chapter 4.

but even to betray their polis to the Spartans and to sacrifice its empire and liberty for their own power and safety.<sup>97</sup>

This judgement by Thucydides is unequivocal and shattering. It may be exaggerated but, given the confirmation by the other sources, it cannot be completely wrong. At least it is telling that Thucydides, who is not known for democratic sympathies, believed this picture to be correct. Thus in the events of 411/10 personal interests, excessive ambition and desire for power, and particularism were the predominant motives, while communal needs and interests were largely disregarded. The thought and actions of those involved remained fixed in the traditional categories of the social, moral, and political polarization between upper and lower classes, and in the corresponding antagonism between democracy and oligarchy – which was even enhanced by the experiences of 411/10. In other words, the political crisis of those years was experienced by contemporaries as a fierce struggle for exclusive power in the polis.

## V

Let us look more closely now at the relation between political thought and political practice. It can hardly be said that political thought did not provide any ideas aimed at resolving the constitutional crisis. Two pieces of evidence seem particularly important. First, Thucydides praises the regime of the Five Thousand as a good system – the first Athens had during his lifetime – because it provided a moderate mixture between consideration of the interests of the few and those of the many, which made it possible for the polis to recover from its difficulties.<sup>98</sup> This regime, too, clearly was an oligarchy. But despite the formulaic figure of five thousand the criterion of the hoplite census almost doubled the number of active citizens so that it was not an oligarchy in the narrow sense of the word.<sup>99</sup> This probably explains Thucydides' judgement that this was a fortunate compromise.

The historian speaks of a "mixture" (*xynkrisis*). Scholars have recognized in this formula an echo of early discussions of the "mixed constitution". It was the purpose of this model (well known from Aristotle and Polybius) to secure unity and stability in the polis by taking into consideration the interests of various classes of citizens and combining the main elements of various constitutions.<sup>100</sup> Since Thucydides gives no details, we do not know how the supporters of such a

<sup>97</sup> Lévy (*supra* n. 95) 32–37.

<sup>98</sup> 8.97.2; Peter J. Rhodes, "The Five Thousand in the Athenian Revolutions of 411 BC", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 92 (1972) 115–27; Gomme, Andrewes and Dover (*supra* n. 69), vol. V, 323–28; Ostwald (*supra* n. 69) 396–99; Edward M. Harris, "The Constitution of the Five Thousand", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 93 (1990) 243–80.

<sup>99</sup> Thuc. 8.97.1; [Lysias] 20.13.

<sup>100</sup> Kurt von Fritz, *The Theory of the Mixed Constitution in Antiquity: A Critical Analysis of Polybius' Political Ideas* (New York 1954); Gerhard J. D. Aalders, *Die Theorie der gemischten Verfassung im Altertum* (Amsterdam 1968); Wilfried Nippel, *Mischverfassungstheorie und Verfassungsrealität in Antike und früher Neuzeit* (Stuttgart 1980) 29–158.

model imagined its practical realization – specifically how the interests of the lower classes, excluded from active citizenship, were to be represented by the others.

Second, a fragment of a treatise by the sophist Thrasymachus survives<sup>101</sup> – a person we know from the first book of Plato's *Republic*. Most likely, this treatise is to be dated precisely to the years in question;<sup>102</sup> it deals explicitly with the problem of civil strife (*stasis*), and it addresses two concepts that became important for the first time in Athens in those years. One is the concept of "civic concord" (*homonoia*). It was discussed systematically in a treatise by the sophist Antiphon.<sup>103</sup> In two critical situations of 411 it was applied successfully by Athenian politicians to avoid civil war (Thuc. 8.75.2, 93.3). Its sudden appearance in our sources proves how pervasive the problem of *stasis* had become by then.<sup>104</sup> Again we do not know whether anybody had specific suggestions about how to realize such concord in the long run against the continuing forces of polarization. Ultimately, as in the case of Euripides discussed earlier, the emphasis on *homonoia* too did not represent a political solution but a moral appeal to recover communal values.

The other concept concerns the "ancestral constitution" (*patrios politeia*).<sup>105</sup> All who are involved in the power struggle, Thrasymachus says, "believe that they are expressing opposite views but fail to perceive that their actions are the same, and that the theory of the opposite side is inherent in their own theory." A prime example "is the issue of the 'constitution of the fathers' which is a cause of dissension between them, though it is easiest to grasp and is the common property of all citizens." We do not know Thrasymachus' explanation and further reasoning but we do know that the concept in question was an issue of political debate at the time. In the assembly preceding that on the Kolonos one Kleitophon moved that the draft committee "should search out also the 'ancestral laws' (*patrioi nomoi*) passed by Cleisthenes when he established the democracy" (Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 29.3). After the fall of the Four Hundred a committee was appointed to pursue this task but did not get very far. The issue came up again in 404/3, was hotly debated, and finally led to the important codification of law between 403 and 399.

<sup>101</sup> Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz (eds.), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* vol. II, 11th edition (Zurich 1964) no.85 B1; tr. in Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Cambridge, MA 1948) 141–42.

<sup>102</sup> Alexander Fuks, *The Ancestral Constitution: Four Studies in Athenian Party Politics at the End of the 5th Century BC* (Cambridge 1953) 103–4.

<sup>103</sup> Diels and Kranz (*supra* n. 101) no.87 B45–71; the extant fragments unfortunately do not touch upon politics.

<sup>104</sup> Lévy (*supra* n. 95) 209–22; cf. Loraux, "Reflections of the Greek City on Unity and Division" in Anthony Molho, Kurt Raaflaub and Julia Emlen (eds.), *City States in Classical Antiquity and Medieval Italy* (Stuttgart and Ann Arbor, MI 1991) 33–51.

<sup>105</sup> Fuks (*supra* n. 102); Moses I. Finley, *The Ancestral Constitution. Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge 1971). Repr. in id., *The Use and Abuse of History* (London 1975) 34–59; Ostwald (*supra* n. 69) 367–72.

Kleitophon is known as a follower of the moderate oligarch, Theramenes. He may have intended to present the planned oligarchy as a return to the "good old democracy" as it had existed before its "degeneration" in recent decades. The democrats, to whom *patrioi nomoi* were the traditional laws of their own constitution which they too traced back to Cleisthenes (Thuc. 8.76.6; Herodotus 6.31.1), might thus find it easier to yield their power. Perhaps Thrasymachus recognized the potential inherent in this convergence on Cleisthenes: the "original" Cleisthenic democracy, coupled with the return to the "good old times" which responded to an elementary psychological need, might provide a compromise acceptable to all. At any rate, the concept was too vague and too open to abuse to provide a broadly based political solution of the constitutional conflict. The same is true of all ideas that aimed in this direction, including the suggestion mentioned by Euripides, to base the community on those in the middle (*mesoi*), who "save the cities by guarding the community's order" (*Suppliants* 244–45); as Thucydides points out (3.82.8), in the case of *stasis* the *mesoi* tended to be attacked and wiped out by both extremes.

Two comments must be added here. First, the crisis that I initially defined as one of democracy turns out to have been much more comprehensive and deep. Accordingly, ideas that aimed at overcoming this crisis dealt not only and specifically with democracy, but rather with the basic conflict between democracy and oligarchy, and the resulting danger of civil strife and the destruction of the community. Given the increased antagonism between democrats and oligarchs and the intransigence of both sides, the crisis of democracy inevitably became a crisis of the entire polis, and the efforts of those who were still capable of thinking integratively focused on *stasis* and possibilities to overcome it.

Second, the vague and ineffective integrative concepts discussed so far represent only one side of the coin. On the other side we observe a remarkable correspondence between thought and action in political practice and some general and theoretical assessments in contemporary literature. I give two examples. The "Old Oligarch" states soberly that democracy and oligarchy were mutually exclusive and irreconcilable systems, each representing the self-interested rule of one part of the citizen body over the other, and that democracy could be improved only by being abolished (Pseudo-Xenophon, *Const. of the Athenians* 1.1–9, 3.8). Such statements certainly reflect the views of the principal actors of 411/10. Thucydides interprets the political conflicts of his age, both within the poleis and between them, as selfish and ruthless power struggles; they were fought by every conceivable means, corresponded to human nature and natural laws, and ultimately aimed at enforcing the rule of the stronger. In his view, Athens too in 411/10 was finally drowned in that type of domestic strife that he analyzed systematically in his "pathology of civil war" at Corcyra (3.69–85, esp. 82–83).<sup>106</sup>

Neither Pseudo-Xenophon nor Thucydides invented the theories underlying their assessments. These theories originated in the sophists' discussions about the

<sup>106</sup> Cf., e.g., 5.84–116; Raaflaub, "Politisches Denken im Zeitalter Athens" (*supra* n. 2) 326–42; Jonathan Price, *Thucydides and Internal Conflict: Stasis as a Model for the Peloponnesian War* (Cambridge 2000).

fundamentals of politics, especially the relation between might and right or between natural and conventional law (*physis* and *nomos*).<sup>107</sup> I need not repeat this here. Rather, I want to discuss briefly four questions that are raised by our analysis of the events of 411/10 and which help to explain at least partly what we have found.

## VI

First, I return once more to the relation between theory and practice in late fifth-century politics. The influence of the sophists peaked in Athens during the Peloponnesian War; at that late stage their thoughts were mostly critical of democracy.<sup>108</sup> Individualism, excessive ambition, and the weakening of loyalty to the polis – all of which we have seen dominating the thoughts and actions of the leading politicians – were enhanced considerably by such influence. They were rampant especially among the young members of the upper class who in a veritable “conflict of generations” revolted against the traditional, and even more the democratic, norms of behavior.<sup>109</sup>

Generalizations are dangerous. Among the sophists there were many differences, and their teachings combined many elements and purposes. Yet they pursued some common ideas.<sup>110</sup> On the one hand, based on empirical observation they defined the laws regulating life in the polis as conventions with limited validity, which led some of them to postulate a marked contrast with natural law, to propagate cosmopolitanism, or to challenge conventional distinctions such as those between free and slaves, Greeks and barbarians, or nobles and commons. Thus they transcended the usual limits of class and polis, and postulated new norms that potentially weakened the individual's loyalty to his polis. On the other hand, most sophists claimed to teach political skills. Here their primary goal was to enable the individual to succeed in politics, that is, within the socio-political norms valid in his polis. In this sphere the sophists' thinking was primarily deductive, not normative. It took political reality as its base and aimed at mastering this reality, thus creating an intimate interaction between political thought and practice. It did not develop an independent position that aimed at transcending this reality (for example, by designing norms of political behavior that primarily served communal interests). It intended not to quench the political power struggle in the interest of the community, but to enable the individual to prevail in this power struggle – thus intensifying it even more. This type of political thought tended to enhance the crisis, not to overcome it. Questions of ethics were neglected or remained secondary.

<sup>107</sup> Ostwald (*supra* n. 69): 250–73; de Romilly (*supra* n. 80) chapter 4.

<sup>108</sup> Robert W. Wallace, “The Sophists in Athens” in Boedeker and Raaflaub (*supra* n. 76) 203–22.

<sup>109</sup> George W. Forrest, “An Athenian Generation Gap”, *Yale Classical Studies* 24 (1975) 37–52.

<sup>110</sup> Guthrie (*supra* n. 80) part I; Kerferd (*supra* n. 80); de Romilly (*supra* n. 80).



Typically, if we can trust Plato, Gorgias believed that the teaching of rhetoric was independent of ethics. He advertised his art as exceedingly powerful, able to teach its practitioners not only to prevail in any situation and over anybody, but in general to be free and to rule over others (Plato, *Gorgias* 449a–b, 452d–e, 456a–c). But he simply seems to have assumed that his pupils would use it only for just causes. When pushed by insistent questions, he conceded that those who did not already know justice would have to be taught (ibid. 456c–457c, 459c–460a) – thereby contradicting his thesis that *aretē* was not teachable. Thus we have to conclude with E. R. Dodds,<sup>111</sup> “that Gorgias and his school have failed to think out the relationship between rhetoric and morals.” The same is probably true for other teachings of the sophists that concerned the public sphere.

Yet this explains only part of the problem. For the sophists simply took advantage of generally accepted political customs and capitalized on corresponding needs and opportunities. Moreover, as we have seen, some sophists were involved in attempts, however unrealistic and unsuccessful, to overcome the problem of *stasis*. And the sophists were not the only thinkers, political or otherwise. Thus the second question we have to ask is, Why was political thought so deeply tied in with firmly established social and political polarizations? Why was it unable to develop stronger impulses to break through these limitations and develop an independent position? And why were these polarizations so firmly established in the first place?

Such questions seem particularly urgent if, by contrast, we consider how earlier Greek thinkers were able to rise above partisan politics, to assume an independent “third position”,<sup>112</sup> and to seek solutions that might overcome conflicts threatening the polis. In the archaic period, these “reconcilers” and lawgivers contributed decisively to developing a political culture. We have discussed (in section 2 above) the contribution of Solon the Athenian in institutionalizing civic responsibility. Typically, in his poems he describes how he stood his ground in the middle and opposed the excessive aspirations of both sides. The intention of Cleisthenes’ reforms at the end of the sixth century clearly was integrative as well (above, end of section 2). In the thought of Aeschylus in the middle of the fifth century we still recognize this impartial perspective inspired by an overarching concern for the community as a whole (*Eumenides* 861–66, 976–87).<sup>113</sup>

By the last third of the century, however, this perspective was apparently lost. The question is, why? This question raises complex issues; here I can only sketch a brief answer. The conflicts, characteristic of the archaic polis, between the interests of the powerful individuals and those of the community, continued into the classical period. The traditional aristocratic values and obligations based on kinship and friendship, and often reaching far beyond the polis, still largely determined the thought and actions of the upper class in the fifth century; between such personal loyalty and the political loyalty claimed by the polis there

<sup>111</sup> E. R. Dodds: *Plato, Gorgias: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford 1959) 217; cf. 10; Ostwald (*supra* n. 69) 243–47.

<sup>112</sup> Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (*supra* n. 2) 44.

<sup>113</sup> Meier, *ibid.*, 116–19.

was constant tension.<sup>114</sup> For democracy introduced new political practices in place of the traditional aristocratic ones, but it was unable to furnish a new system of ethics. Thus political enmity, injury by a rival or the priority attributed to personal obligations could at any time provoke reactions that were disastrous to the polis. In this respect there was no fundamental difference between the actions and reactions of Achilles in the *Iliad*, the Athenian Isagoras who sought the support of his *xenos*, the Spartan king Cleomenes, when he lost his competition with Cleisthenes (Herod. 5.66, 70, 72), the exiled Spartan king Demaratos who returned to Greece as an advisor to King Xerxes, Alcibiades who collaborated with the Spartans against Athens after 415, and many others.

This permanent potential for conflict was enhanced in Athens by the immense opportunities offered to the individual by the empire. Despite its efforts to depersonalize politics and increase collective responsibility, democracy had the same effect: politics remained highly personal and increasingly became the battleground of strong individuals competing with each other for power and lasting popular favor – particularly after the death of Pericles who had provided a long period of stability, and under the detrimental influences of the Peloponnesian War. Individualism and ambition soared and became more radical, the polarizations within the citizen body intensified; the sense of communal responsibility and the ability to rise above partisan interests were weakened – especially since under the influence of new intellectual currents the traditional communal values and norms were no longer generally accepted. In addition, it seems, there was a dearth of eminent leaders with sufficient independence and authority to stem this tide and convincingly advocate integrative concepts.

Moreover, the claim to represent the interests of the community as a whole had, by that time, been tainted by partisan ideology.<sup>115</sup> The oligarchs paid lip-service to it, while to the democrats it was an integral part of their self-understanding. To them, *demokratia* did not mean, as it did to the oligarchs, “rule by the lower classes” but “rule by the people” in the sense of the entire citizen body. In their view, the interests of the entire polis could be represented only by a regime that gave full equality to all citizens and expected all to identify with their polis and put all of their energies to work for it. Thus the democrats naturally argued inclusively, not exclusively, as their opponents did. For obvious reasons the oligarchs could not accept such claims. In other words, the debate about particularism versus the common good was old and linked to the debate about democracy; integrative ideas were “ideologically” marked, and proposals emphasizing these values were not generally acceptable as a platform to overcome political polarization – especially to the opponents of democracy and as long as oligarchy had not had its chance and had not been discredited as an alternative.

Such considerations make it easier to understand why compromise and integrative programs could not prevail at that time. We also understand better

<sup>114</sup> Arthur W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford 1960); Gabriel Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge 1987).

<sup>115</sup> Raphael Sealey, “The Origins of *Demokratia*”, *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 6 (1973) especially 280–90; Raaflaub (*supra* n. 73) 41–48, 60–61.

now why Euripides considered personal attitudes and behavior and thus moral criteria at least as important as laws and institutions and thus the political sphere. This brings up my third question, concerning the relationship between morals and politics in late fifth-century thought. Again, I have to limit myself to a few suggestions. Clearly, the two were not strictly separated, and moral concerns continued to be an integral part of thinking about political problems – despite the sophists' ventures into political theory or the knowledge, certainly common among Athenian leaders from the time of Ephialtes, if not Cleisthenes, that institutions and the whole constitution were changeable by simple popular fiat and that such change could be used to advance specific political goals. Rather, various factors contributed to keeping moral concerns in the foreground even of the increasingly autonomous political sphere.

For, on the one hand, as I just said, despite the "rule by the people" in assembly and law courts and the distribution of functions and responsibilities among thousands of citizens, democracy continued to depend heavily on the leadership of a relatively small circle of influential persons.<sup>116</sup> Their integrity and sense of responsibility, that is, their moral qualities, thus were crucially important. On the other hand, as is visible in numerous ways, discussions about constitutions in the fifth century did not focus on abstract or theoretical ideals nor on the question of what system might be the best by any objective standards but on the concrete problem of who was to hold power and govern in the city,<sup>117</sup> and how such rule could best be maintained. Despite democratic efforts to change this perspective, the institutions were primarily seen as instruments to guarantee the rule of those in power. Thus, according to general perception, there was an intimate connection between a given constitution and the persons supporting it; successes or failures were credited or blamed less on the institutions than on the persons involved. Consequently, political or military setbacks resulted normally in the replacement or conviction of those responsible, in extreme cases (as in 411/10) in the overthrow and replacement of the whole system and the exclusion of those most intimately involved with it. It is understandable, therefore, that critics focused on the moral qualities of those supporting or representing the system; in the case of democracy, on the moral and personal deficiencies of the demagogues and the demos.

Finally, my fourth and last question: under these conditions, what possibilities were available to those who still tried to overcome the conflicts and find integrative solutions? I see mainly two alternatives. On the political-theoretical side, it was possible to search for pragmatic compromises, based on models such as those mentioned before: the polis-saving middle class, or the mixed constitution. Such ideas were further discussed in the fourth century; they are analyzed systematically in Aristotle's *Politics*.<sup>118</sup> Others, moving away entirely from the

<sup>116</sup> Walter Eder, "Aristocrats and the Coming of Athenian Democracy", in Morris and Raaflaub (*supra* n. 48) 107 therefore uses for the 5th-century democracy terms such as "aristocracy by acclamation" or "guided democracy".

<sup>117</sup> Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (*supra* n. 2) chapter 7.

<sup>118</sup> Nippel (*supra* n. 100) 52–63, 98–123.

existing and generally flawed constitutions, tried to construct ideal models of state and society; this is the road chosen in the fifth century by Hippodamos of Miletus and others (Aristotle, *Politics* 1266a39–68a15) and later by Plato.

On the other, ethical-philosophical side, the search began precisely where Euripides located the fundamental problem: in the sphere of morals. If politics was sick because the citizens, whether leaders or followers, put their individual interests above the common good – that is, if they operated with wrong moral principles – then help was to be expected not from a change of institutions but only from a basic moral renewal: the revival of communal values and the development of goodness in all human beings.

Thus Euripides' solution with which we began proves quite understandable. Moreover, the poet had good company. We have already discussed the appeal to *homonoia*, urgently raised at that very time, and Aeschylus' call for domestic solidarity and peace. Pericles, as portrayed by Thucydides (2.42–43, 60), stresses the crucial significance of devotion to and sacrifice for the community. Democritus writes: "One must give the highest importance to affairs of the State, that it may be well-run; one must not pursue quarrels contrary to right, nor acquire a power contrary to the common good. The well-run State is the greatest protection, and contains all in itself; when this is safe, all is safe; when this is destroyed, all is destroyed."<sup>119</sup> In his famous myth Protagoras identifies justice and respect for others (*dikē* and *aidōs*) as the bonds that support order and friendship and hold the cities together; all citizens, he postulates, have to share in these qualities, and "if anyone is incapable of acquiring his share of these two virtues he shall be put to death as a plague to the city" (Plato, *Protagoras* 322c–d). Here Protagoras, followed later in the century by the so-called Anonymus Iamblichi,<sup>120</sup> takes a firm stand against tendencies extolling individualism and unlimited ambition.

Ultimately, the question of how such moral ideals could be realized had to remain open, despite frequent demands that the young should be educated carefully. Despite much progress we too are still far from having solved this problem. But precisely these questions caused Socrates to pursue his penetrating and uncomfortable inquiries. He kept asking whether *aretē* could be taught, and what it really was; he tried to find precise definitions for values that were essential to the community, such as courage, justice, or moderation. Thus he laid the foundations for the quest continued by Plato: to recognize goodness and thus to be able to educate the good person who would be capable of realizing the good life in a good community.<sup>121</sup>

# Forms of Belief and Rationality in Greece

Jean-Pierre Vernant

The following observations are not methodological in intention, nor do they constitute a sociological reflection on the general problems relating to the nature of belief or reason, or to the insertion of the religious into society. The field with which I am concerned is very specific: essentially Greek religion, and I want to reflect on two types of problems which can confront an historian of religions working in the Greek domain and with a sociological interest.

The first question could be formulated in the following fashion: what is the status and what are the boundaries of the religious in a society such as archaic and classical Greece from the eighth to the fourth century BC? We speak about "Greek religion", about the "religious", and then about Greek society, civil society, the city, political life, but what are the relations between these two levels?

Given the manner in which we live and study the religious today in our societies, given the problems which this poses and which we cannot escape, we cannot help reading this different culture within a modern frame. We know that this is inadequate but we cannot detach ourselves from it. Hence the second problem. When we say religion, we understand "faith", "belief", a specific form of adherence, which we do not find in other domains such as science for example. What then are the modalities and functions of *believing*, of belief, compare it with other types of intellectual attitudes, let us say conviction, even certainty?

These are the two types of question to which I would like to offer not conclusions but reflections: the modalities and functions of belief in relation to what in our eyes is not exactly faith, and the place of the religious in the social. As we shall see, these two approaches are in reality tied together.

## The Modalities of Belief

What is to believe? To believe in Zeus, or in Athene, in Hestia or in Hermes, what does this mean in a society, a religion, which is not a religion of the book and where there is no Church? In ancient Greece there were priesthoods that were the prerogative of certain families – they became rare as a whole – or of magistratures, delegated like other civic functions according to instituted electoral procedures. There is a very close link between all these magistratures; they are all conceived in the same fashion. Thus we have no priestly sacerdotal body, neither do we have tradition, dogma or credo (what could be belief in a religion which has no credo?) Nor do we have theology, since a theology presupposes books, a

body of specialists who reflect on these books and who elaborate a certain number of certainties or beliefs that will define belonging to this religion. Nothing of this kind exists or can exist! But if there are no sacred texts, no priestly body to reflect on these texts, dispense instruction and determine even their interpretation, where are we to locate belief?

If I analyze Greek religion, I observe of course that "believing" cannot be separated from practices, that religion is not separated from the ensemble of social relations and practices. I cannot pose the problem of beliefs outside of the three elements that constitute a religious system: the first embraces what we call rituals. To believe is to carry out a certain number of acts in the course of the day or in the course of the year, with festivals fixed according to the calendar, the activities of daily life, the manner in which I eat, marry, leave on a journey, take certain domestic or even political decisions. And not in just any fashion but according to rules which are social, political and domestic all at the same time and which also have a religious character: because there is the understanding, as the vocabulary indicates, that if I do not do so I am acting impiously. I am committing a fault which belongs not only to the civil, political or legal domain but also to the religious. All this, however, is immersed in daily practices – individual, familial, relating to the organization of the *deme* of which I am a member, and of the city. Beliefs, one could say, are put to work in practices. We have proof in the great trials for impiety: of what are Socrates or Anaxagoras accused? Not of their beliefs, their intimate convictions towards the divine. The trials for impiety investigate the fact either of having introduced gods foreign to the city or of not having carried out the *prescribed* rituals as required. It is not a question here of deviation from the traditional sacred representations, or stories of intellectual divergences in the interpretation of cultic matters. This system has no place for the idea of heresy. It has no meaning.

The second element besides these rites: the figure of the gods, the divine images, the idols. Here I would simply say that these idols are inserted into a social and political system, that their symbolic value, from the point of view of the psychology of the believer, who beholds them, or prostrates himself or places offerings in their hands or gives them a raiment, is never independent of the social symbolic values, the *prestige*, which the possession of this idol confers. The idol functions as a symbol which permits, in certain cases and under certain conditions, actions according to modalities comparable to those which Pierre Bourdieu has cast light on in another context.

Let me give an example which enables us to understand perfectly what I want to say. There are ancient, completely archaic idols which are called *xoana*; they are non-representative idols, more or less shapeless pieces of wood which have a sacred value through everything they represent in the mind of their devotees. These idols are the privilege of particular individuals or families who guard them and keep them secret and hidden. The possession of these idols gives them certain social powers, tied to their functions. Now, at a certain point, we can observe how these idols cease to exercise this role and how the divine image is detached from

secrecy and the privatization of the powers that they confer on privileged persons. They are confiscated by the city, i.e. the collectivity, which now makes them available to public view. From this point onwards the idol becomes a sort of mirror in which the city can look at itself. There are two very clear examples: in a period of social troubles, of *stasis* (revolt, rebellion), we see a person take one of these iconic symbols, a *xoanon*, and carry it out of the city in the grip of disorder. At the moment the rebels surround him, he displays the image: the others are halted, absolutely terrorized and surprised, and from this moment, as is related in the more or less legendary stories, the image ceases to belong to the house of the person who displayed it: it becomes the common good of the city. The city is reconciled, and the person who possessed this image, he and his descendants, becomes the titular priesthood of this divinity. It shows how the powers, and the connections, the bonds of personal loyalty, which unite through an iconic symbol a group of people to a divinity, that is, to special powers, are transferred to the community, the priestly family no longer having a role within the frame of the city. One can thus analyse sociologically the manner of functioning of certain iconic symbols and the beliefs they mobilize.

The third element, besides rituals and the images of the gods, is constituted by myths. Faith does not reside in sacred books but in what is told in these stories. But how did the Greeks know them? They were transmitted orally over a long period and then since the sixth century, at least for a certain number of myths, acquired through writing a canonic form, with Homer, with Hesiod and the whole epic tradition. Besides Homer this comprised many other songs of the same kind, which have survived only in fragmentary form. It is this poetic tradition, this tradition sung by the bards, which constitutes the "breviary" of beliefs but also the encyclopedia of the collective knowledge of the group. Plato could say that one learns from Homer to be a carpenter, a warrior chief, a sailor: school children learn Homer and Hesiod by heart, *paideia* consists in repeating these texts which have a sort of canonic value. And in these texts, everything that concerns what we call religion – the gods, the heroes, the descriptions of cults, a certain number of reflections on hospitality, justice, those punished by Zeus – is learnt at the same time as everything else.

Even after Homer these poetic stories were infinitely developed by the lyric and tragic poets. But they were not really fixed, even when written down. They involved all sorts of versions. Take Hesiod, who relates the genesis of the gods in the *Theogony*. He is the only one to undertake something like theology. There are, however, many other versions besides that of Hesiod. His is in no way dogmatic. The Greeks certainly *believe*, there is no atheism, which is unthinkable, but that does not mean that they have a dogma or a theology. That also means that there is no radical criticism because affirmation does not take a deliberate and dogmatic form which would give rise to a sort of complete negation. There is the Hesiodic tradition and many others also, and this has no importance. I do not think that a single Greek thought that things really happened as the poets described, but that does not mean at all that they were therefore false for them. They were sensible, within the world itself, to the diverse ways of expressing the powers with which

one must reckon. Their belief was very assured but lacked all dogmatism on the intellectual level; it was flexible enough to adapt to multiple versions. Belief was not expressed in a dogmatic language, as for instance in Christianity, which needed to harmonize a certain number of dogmas of truth, and elaborate (for example) a trinitarian dogma with reference to the contributions of Platonism, Aristotelianism, Neo-Platonism, that is, reconcile their stories with the rational principles of philosophical thought. In Greece this was not a problem because philosophical thought had not yet imposed itself. Belief was of the kind one grants to a story knowing that it is only a story...

There is something here which is very important and very difficult to define: a religion, whose beliefs are expressed by poets, but poets with a very different status to *our* poets, poets, who played a fundamental role in their society; the inspired bard is in some way the collective memory of the group, he is the "book", in which is collected all the knowledge that constitutes the social cement of the group, and finally he is a storyteller – and everyone knows that he is storyteller.

Poetry continued to develop, these stories were modified, but above all the status of poetry changed. What then is the relation between this *trust* accorded to the poets, a trust I would call fundamental – the trust in oneself, in one's own life, in one's own culture, in one's own manner of thinking – and the fact that relatively early the idea emerges that all this amounts to what we call *fiction*, imaginary things which are not the real? We need to grasp the connection, whose development we can follow, between the belief which expresses, as we said, a religious certainty, even though its forms are diverse, and on the other hand the very clear consciousness that all this amounts to fiction. There are two poles, and these two poles are never completely separated.

We have here a series of problems which call in question the idea that, from a sociological point of view, there is such a thing as a structure of religious belief defined once and for all as a permanent category: that there is religious belief and that there are other things. Things are not divided to this degree – various problems are posed by a given religion within a given culture: those of the types of belief, the forms they can take and their modalities.

### The Inscription of the Religious in the Socio-political Structure

Secondly, we are dealing with a polytheistic system, whose characteristics I am trying to show, along with and after many other scholars. A polytheistic religion is not exactly the same thing as a monotheistic religion. To put it briefly: there is not only a pantheon, but every city has its own pantheon, this is one of the characteristics of Greek religion. The epics of Homer, of Hesiod and many others, had a panhellenic character; there were also panhellenic sanctuaries like Delphi and from the eighth century on great panhellenic festivals such as the Olympic games, at which Greeks from very different cities, often hostile to each other, came together. There is thus a kind of common architecture, made up of the



great common sanctuaries and the blossoming of a panhellenic literature. At the same time, however, each city had its own particular religious organization. At one place Athene plays the leading role, at another it is Hera, but no god can ever be seen solely by himself; the gods are always associated with other divinities. Moreover, there are not only the gods of the city, there are the gods outside the city, the gods of the borders, the gods of the different demes, of different individual groups, the local gods tied to certain aspects of the territory. We can see that the polytheistic system is intricately linked with the forms of socio-political organization at all levels: this religion can be called a political religion. During the whole period the fundamental fact is the creation of the city. Religion is one expression of this great phenomenon. It means that the religious is much more a form of social and collective life than a form of personal experience and personal bond to the divinity. I would say that there are no persons in Greece, persons in our sense, and that the relation to the divinity is never that which unites the individual subject – in the interiority of conscience, of soul (which would require an elaboration of the concept of the soul) – to a divinity, who is also in a certain way a person, even if unfathomable, incomprehensible and beyond our categories. For the Greeks, love goes from man to the god (one loves what one has need of, what one lacks), but the god cannot love humans. It is still a long way from the idea that the love of the creature for God is the counterpart to God's love for us: this is incomprehensible for the Greeks. True, there are philanthropic gods in the sense that they wish us no evil. But love as a fundamental concept plays no role at all.

In other words, there is no religious bond between an individual and the divinity other than that exercised through a social mediation. One enters into a relation with the divine as the head of the household, as member of a deme, as member of a city, as a magistrate, etc. The relation with the divine occurs through a social function. Religion exists neither within man (within a sphere of individual inner life) nor beyond the universe (in the form of a unique and absolute god exterior to the world in which we live and the society in which we are embedded). The gods are there, superior to us, but, I would say, in the same world. Besides, they did not create this world; on the contrary, they were created by a process that unfolded in the world itself. They are a part of the world. There is no transcendence – or not, in any case, on the level of religion. There is, of course, a relative transcendence but it does not receive an intellectual elaboration aiming to make God superior to everything created, created by him from nothing, an absurd idea for the Greeks...

The boundaries of religion cannot therefore be determined precisely in relation to socio-political life. And since we are dealing with a polytheistic system, the role of this religion is to define, to mark more clearly the social particularities of a city in relation to other cities, and Greekness in relation to what is not Greek. Religion does not have a universal character, it does not tend to go beyond the civilization in which it is rooted, it does not seek (through missions or crusades) to spread this religious universe beyond the society in which it is expressed, nor is it incarnated in a priestly body both inside and outside this society. Greek religion

is for the Greeks. Against this, they are quite ready to accept a foreign god from time to time, if it is of advantage. For them, some religions are just as good as theirs; they have the greatest admiration for Egyptian religion and, during the Hellenistic period, they are readily fascinated by Judaism or by Indian religions. They do not even have the idea that religions represent civilization and that their religion, their practices, the manner in which they sacrifice, act, eat, drink, marry, and envisage the rules governing the relations between fathers and children, men and women, constitute the civilized world – of which religion is only one aspect, immersed in this culture. It is not, I believe, what gives this culture its most distinctive mark, it is only one aspect of its singularities, since the conception that the Greeks have of their gods is tied for them to the fact that they have consultative assemblies, that men are not slaves but free men. At the same time, religion in Greece is not something that sufficiently surpasses the frame of its historical moment and particular society to give it a universalist calling. Hence its beliefs have no conquering character, are not given as an absolute truth. As Herodotus observed: whom we call Dionysus the Egyptians called Osiris; they do things differently from us, rather strangely and probably much more ancient, since how we think of Dionysus comes from them. No conquering spirit, no conception that religious belief should have the function of absolute truth related to an absolute and unique divine. We have a relativism of religious belief: the Greeks are convinced that it is like this for them, but understand very well that it is different elsewhere. This involves a place for belief that, for the historian and the sociologist, is quite different to what we are accustomed.

Beyond that, Greece offers us, I think, a privileged domain, which shows that it is extremely difficult to separate in a radical fashion a sphere of belief from a sphere of rationality. I leave to one side here the question of genesis in the field of belief (and in the field of Greek social life) of types of thought, reasoning and conviction, which distanced themselves from the common religious ground. The latter was transmitted by the system of *paideia*: the epic, lyric poetry and the oral tradition constituted the common ground of belief. If we take the fifth century, what do we see? First of all, apart from these stories which transmitted a certain amount of variable information about the gods and heroes, all those beings addressed by cultic practice, we see the constitution of a properly political level, which is the object of systematic reflection, which is subjected more and more to rhetorical procedures through debates in the assemblies and deliberations in the tribunals directed to regulating matters which earlier had not been the province of the civic community but arose from private vendettas or relations of force between opposed groups. The city takes over these social functions, takes justice in hand, establishes tribunals in which chosen judges arbitrate between the two parties; they fight but now with the weapons of argument, giving birth to rhetoric and (with it) sophistry, that is, the analysis of discourse forms with a view to persuasion, *peithō*. Naturally there is a divinity to express this: *Peithō*, persuasion, the power of persuasion. This divinity is a religious power but expresses itself in the tribunal, the *agora* or in the *ecclesia*, since it has become necessary to develop everywhere an argued discourse capable of commanding persuasion

among the audience. From this point the belief in *Peithō* is no longer religious, even if it is the goddess who acts. Take Gorgias: with his whole symbolic apparatus, his scarlet toga, he is a first rate actor, he writes texts, in which he explains that the power of persuasion is a kind of quasi-magical force, like that emanating from Helen when she seduces all men, that the knowledge and the talent of the rhetorician has a kind of power comparable to magic; but, at the same time, he composes his texts in such a way, with such verbal play, that what we have here above all is the art, the rhetoric, the necessity of argument.

Thus, side by side with the old stories which you heard as a child – these nurses' tales Plato speaks of (which he did not despise but wanted to replace by something else) – these stories which absorb you, which teach you to classify things, to put them and you yourself into a place in this classification, side by side with these stories, in which through believing you enter into conformity with the social and even the cosmic order, a type of intellectual attitude is developing, a type of discourse that is not a story but an argument: an argument *ad hominem*, scarcely related to the concern for the true but which constitutes a fundamental dimension of Greek life. Its role is precisely persuasion, that is, belief but not religious belief. It distances itself from religion, since the sophists like Protagoras say that one can say nothing about the gods, that one does not even know if they exist and that, if they do, we can know nothing about them. Thus *peithō* operates in human affairs on a political, juridical or personal level, but it is a force that develops a new type of discourse, the discourse of argued persuasion. It competes with the old stories which enchanted you, not only because they related extraordinary things, but because at the end you had the feeling of having understood why Zeus is Zeus and why the gods are gods, why humans are unhappy and mortal, and why there are heroes between humans and the gods. You can also understand this in a romance or poem, while all the while knowing that they are the fiction of the poet. Conversely, there is an argued discourse with another type of belief as a result. Moreover, this symbolic field valorizes the personage of the sophist, his type of discourse and his intellectual procedures, because they bestow in effect a certain social power: it is to the sophist that the man of politics turns to draft his speeches, it is to him that noble families confide their children to learn to become leaders in the city. Thus prestige and power are linked in this type of belief, tied to a particular modality of argued discourse.

Against this we have another personage: the philosopher, the product in part of religious traditions (but I leave to one side the problem of genesis) and of another institution: the great philosophical academies, such as those founded by Plato and Aristotle. In these philosophical institutions Plato attacks the old *paideia*, all those stories which he calls, giving them a special meaning, *mūthoi*; tales, fables invented to instruct children. He wants to teach the latter two new types of discourse from the perspective of belief and rationality, which cannot be separated, since there is a certain type of rationality in the mythic story, another rationality in the discourse of the sophists, and yet another in the belief of the philosopher.

The first innovation: the dialogue between master and pupil, debate, discussion, a discussion which does not aim to vanquish or persuade in the sense of *peithō* (here a systematic study of vocabulary is called for on belief in Greece, *peithō*). In the eyes of the philosopher sophistic *peithō* consists in vanquishing the adversary, in trapping him in the nets of an astute dialectic, so that, reduced to silence, he surrenders the fight. The dialogue with the pupil has the inverse intention: it is governed not by *peithō* but by *pistis*. This word, which later meant faith, designates trust, reciprocal trust; the master does not try to vanquish, to silence; he seeks through the play of questions and answers, a living discourse (as Socrates and Plato said) to aid the birth in the disciple of his own discourse, the discourse of truth. Not to impose through his weapons the victory of persuasion but to bring about the triumph of the true through a process of trusting discussion; not the victory of an individual in a contradictory debate, the victory of one party but that of the truth. This truth – the second innovation – is attained by another type of discourse which is demonstration, since discussion must be a form of demonstration.

From the point of view of rationality this is a fundamental idea; it is also related to the development of mathematics, and will find its finest expression in Euclid: the idea that man is capable of inventing a discourse, in which, given the premises, everything follows necessarily. Henceforth truth relates to the internal coherence of the discourse, to its internal non-contradiction, and no longer to its adequation to the real. It is this that characterizes the great philosophical current.

This type of rationality opposes both that of the sophists and that of myth; it is tied to a new social symbolism in which the master, the philosopher plays an institutional role, has his own academy and pupils, on whom he impresses his stamp. He needs to distinguish himself from the sophist and also from the tragic poet, who declaims in buskins and with a mask. The discourse of the philosopher is distinguished by its rationality, by the faith, the trust tied up with its coherence. Now, with Plato this internal coherence of discourse takes on a certain religious quality: the idea that values exist, values that with him are already transcendent, *to theion*, the divine. We know how Plato opposes *logos*, that is, this type of argued discourse, to *mūthos*. At first, *logos* and *mūthos* were synonymous; they denoted the same thing: a word/speech (*parole*). But from the moment the personage of the philosopher and the philosophical schools emerge, *logos* starts to be opposed to *mūthos*. *Logos* is the discourse which stands upright, which is coherent and consistent; *mūthos* is a fable, a tale which contradicts itself, which lacks coherence. At the same time Plato declares that some of the old *mūthoi* – those for example that let us think that the soul is not mortal or that there is punishment after death, or that God is above everything that can be said – should be rescued, and that we should believe in them. We must believe in them because, although absolute coherence suits mathematics, in order to regulate human life we need to root ourselves in something in which (in one way or another) *peithō* has a role to play. Even where rationality appears in its full purity, even there belief suddenly asserts itself, in a form which for want of a better word we have to call religious, faith in something that surpasses us. In all these fields, belief has its

proper forms and is joined to different types of belief involving rationality – there are different types of rationality, which lead to what will become in the western world the philosophical and the scientific traditions; but these types of rationality cannot function and cannot be conceived without the reintroduction of belief, but a type of belief perhaps different from that we find with the sophists or in myth.

There are then different fields, and each corresponds sociologically at the same time to institutions, to a social functioning, to the search – through these types of discourse, of rationality and of belief – for certain powers and prestige: thus the philosopher combats the sophist and wants to drive out the tragic poet. In the social field belief and rationality coexist in diverse fashion. There are also other, more localized fields: such as the historical rationality and belief of the historians. In an oral society without archives Herodotus or above all Thucydides consider that the human events, in which they took part or which just preceded them, should be recorded to preserve their memory. They construct a kind of historical time – a kind of historical rationality – in which there is to be found both rationality and belief. For instance, they rework the old opposition between hearing and seeing. In Greek, seeing, *autopsis* is at the same time knowing; knowledge is direct vision. Hitherto culture had been transmitted by ear. Henceforth what matters to historians is to have seen what they relate. The historical fact is what one has participated in, seen, what has been verified directly. The historians distrust what has been passed on by word of mouth. There is therefore an opposition between trust, persuasion obtained directly by seeing, which will define this kind of historical rationality, and all the rumours, all the legends concerning these events, on which one cannot rely. Similarly, all the other types of rationality need to be considered: for example that of the medical writings of the time. It is not a question of opposing religious belief to reason. We must rather analyse the social fields, the social and mental activities, the techniques of speech and writing, which involve certain forms of rationality and at the same time definite forms of belief that may oppose those encountered elsewhere.

## Beasts, Humans and Gods: The Greek View

Pierre Vidal-Naquet

Should I apologize for not beginning this discussion with a Greek text but with a French one dating from the very height of the positivist era, which was also the age of the "conquering bourgeoisie"? I will be talking about *The Mysterious Island* by Jules Verne, published in 1874.<sup>1</sup> This novel is a variation on the Robinsonian theme; it confronts a group of shipwrecked persons, discreetly protected by a hidden God (Captain Nemo), with nature (the island). If we disregard the absence of women (obviously of major importance), the insular community described by Jules Verne is in some ways a complete society. Its upper stratum, made up of an engineer and a journalist (both American), is egalitarian. These two are the only completely human beings in the novel.<sup>2</sup> The middle stratum is represented by an honest sailor and a young boy who will grow up to be a man, like the engineer Cyrus Smith and the journalist Gideon Spilett. At the bottom of the ladder, there is a freed Black, Nebukadnezar (called Neb), accompanied by a dog called Tom and a tame monkey called Jupiter (Jup for short).<sup>3</sup> There is a perfect understanding between the Negro and the monkey, but the monkey is the only character in the story who does not survive.<sup>4</sup>

After a series of shared adventures, this mini-society has gone in search of a shipwrecked person who is alone on a neighboring island but has made his existence known to them. But when they arrive, they discover a "singular being", instead of the speaking and thinking human being whom they had expected to meet. "Indeed it was not an ape, it was a human being, a man. But what a man! A savage in all the horrible acceptation of the word, and so much the more frightful that he seemed fallen to the lowest degree of brutishness! Shaggy hair, untrimmed beard descending to the chest, the body almost naked except a rag round the waist, wild eyes, enormous hands with immensely long nails, skin the colour of mahogany, feet as hard as if made of horn ... Hoarse sounds issued from his throat between his teeth, which were sharp as the teeth of a wild beast made to

<sup>1</sup> This author is, of course, more complex than I can show here; cf. J. Chesneaux, *Une lecture politique de Jules Verne* (Paris 1971).

<sup>2</sup> More precisely, they are Yankees who were taken prisoners by Southerners in the Civil War and later managed to escape in a balloon.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Besançon has pointed out to me that only these two characters have monosyllabic names (more precisely pet names). We might add that the Negro and the monkey have names of mythological origin: Judeo-Christian in the case of the Negro (who has been baptized), Roman in the case of the monkey.

<sup>4</sup> To complete the picture, we should note a marginal element, namely pirates who are rapidly annihilated by Captain Nemo's scientific technology.

tear raw flesh."<sup>5</sup> The "covering rag" is important, because it does – in spite of everything – identify this wild creature as a human. Naturally, he attacks the young boy; we may see this behavior as a symbol of sexual aggression. How is this being to be reintegrated into human society? The expression in his eyes suggests that "he might not have lost all reason", and when he sees a flame, he is capable of focusing his attention on it for a moment. But the real return of the child-molesting savage – who turns out to be the ex-convict Ayrton – only takes place when he saves the same child from another wild creature: a jaguar.<sup>6</sup> This animal jumps at the boy, the savage rushes to help him and kills the beast with a dagger (the weapon is a human thing, no less so than good will). He can now rejoin the human community.

It would be easy to analyze this text as such as the outcome of a whole literary and anthropological tradition. I have only used it to illustrate a basic truth: all human societies, including those who we call savage, define the criteria of savagery in their own ways. All have their "wild men" – from Enkidu to the abominable snowman, not to mention Polyphemus and Tarzan.<sup>7</sup> There is no wild human being as such and in isolation; the wild state is always negatively defined by the criteria of "civilization", and they vary from time to time as well as from place to place, even if some elements remain constant (for instance the contrast between the "raw" and the "cooked"). And it would be hard to find a more clearly dated text than Jules Verne's novel: it is a perfect example of what Serge Moscovici calls the "orthodox tradition".

Let us now move to the Greek world as we know it through its texts.<sup>8</sup> How is the problem posed at the beginning of Greek literature, i.e. in Homer and Hesiod? As I have tried to show elsewhere, these texts presuppose a definition of the human being in contrast to gods as well as to wild beasts, even if humans are capable of communicating with both these other worlds.<sup>9</sup>

Humans are separated from gods by the killing of the sacrificial animal, followed by a sharing-out that reproduces the original division described by Hesiod.<sup>10</sup> Prometheus, the cultural hero of humanity, deceived Zeus, his adversary and

<sup>5</sup> J. Verne, *The Mysterious Island*, vol. II: *Abandoned* (London 1875) 201–02.

<sup>6</sup> We may recall the interesting fact that in Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*, the jaguar is an intermediary between humanity, the savage world and the world of culture: he sometimes gives women and sometimes receives them.

<sup>7</sup> As for the Middle Ages, cf. J. Le Goff and P. Vidal-Naquet, "Lévi-Strauss en Brocéliande. esquisse pour une analyse d'un roman courtois" first published in *Critique* 1979 and then in an expanded version in R. Bellour and C. Clément (eds.), *Lévi-Strauss* (Paris 1979) 265–319. Also included in J. Le Goff, *L'imaginaire médiéval*.

<sup>8</sup> Expressions of the dichotomy of savagery and civilization in the plastic arts have yet to be studied in detail.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. P. Vidal-Naquet, "Land and sacrifice in the Odyssey: A study of religious and mythical meanings" in P. Vidal-Naquet, *The Black Hunter* (Baltimore and London 1986) 15–38.

<sup>10</sup> See J.-P. Vernant, "Prométhée et la fonction technique" in J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, vol. II (Paris 1965) 5–15.

accomplice. Having the choice between meat and bones (the latter hidden by fat), Zeus chooses the bones. Man thus receives the dead flesh and becomes a meat-eater. The gods enjoy the smoke rising from the sacrificial meat, as well as the perfumes spread round before the sacrifice. Every sacrifice thus repeats the act that put an end to the community and commensalism of men, gods and animals. That condition is also known in the Greek tradition as the Golden Age or the age of Kronos: the time when there was no difference between gods, men and animals.

The separation from savage nature is achieved in a different way. Let us note that it is a matter of *savage* nature, because this problem is more complicated than the simple contrast between "nature" and "culture". Here the practice of hunting is the crucial dividing factor. I will not be trying to show – as S. Moscovici did – that the process of "humanization" was in fact based on hunting.<sup>11</sup> I am not dealing with a historical problem; rather, the issue is to be considered within a given culture. If the consumption of the sacrificed animal unites men and gods, hunting is – in, a sense – shared by the human being and the predatory animal. A lion hunts, much as man does. In literature, images of hunting are therefore frequently used to define the savage part of man.<sup>12</sup> But hunting is also ambiguous in that it involves a *technē*, and thus belongs to the technical apparatus of humanity: a predator armed with *technē* is no longer a wild animal, and that is why both Plato and Aristotle link hunting to the art of politics.<sup>13</sup>

These are, then, the two fundamental exclusions and the two signs which set humanity apart from gods and from wild animals. But the most remarkable thing about this view is that the double exclusion boils down to a single one. For the Golden Age is not simply the idyllic epoch described by Hesiod and frequently evoked in the same terms by later poets as well as writers of prose. There is also a cannibalistic side to it. It is no accident that Kronos is both the sovereign ruler of the Golden Age and the God who devours his children (and who is therefore identified with the Phoenician Moloch). Between bliss and cannibalism, there are points of contact admirably understood by Homer when he creates (or adapts) the character of Polyphemus: the cannibal for whom everything grows spontaneously, and who can even enjoy self-grown wine.<sup>14</sup> All Greek ideologies, orthodox or heterodox (in the sense defined by S. Moscovici), have to choose between these two images of the past: the Golden Age and the time of cannibalism. They are, as we have seen, closer to each other than one might think. And in grappling with them, the ideologies amplify the contents of the myth, which is never found in a pure form. Homer may represent myth to Thucydides or Plato, but there is also an ideological dimension to his work.

<sup>11</sup> S. Moscovici, *La société contre nature* (Paris 1972).

<sup>12</sup> On this theme in Aeschylus, cf. P. Vidal-Naquet, "Hunting and sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*" in J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece* (Atlantic Highlands N.Y. 1981) 150–74.

<sup>13</sup> Plato *Prot.* 322b; Arist. *Pol.* 1250 b23.

<sup>14</sup> *The Odyssey* IX 109–11. But Homer adds that this was a rather miserable drink.



But let us take a closer look at the "orthodox" line. It is not only based on exclusions; it also defines a number of social practices – especially agriculture – in positive terms. Greek man is a farmer before he becomes a citizen. Wherever Ulysses finds cultivated fields, his is among men. But the Lotophagi, who live on fruits, are no less inhuman than the Cyclopes, who eat human beings. Circe and Calypso are "goddesses with a human voice", not human beings, and the absence of cultivated fields is a clear sign of that; other signs are more ambiguous, for example fire, which indicates cooking.<sup>15</sup> The contrast between the raw and the cooked is perceived as inconclusive. The divide between the two realms is so fundamental that when Ulysses moves from one universe to the other (from the world described in the stories told to Alcinoos to the eminently human world of Ithaca), he must pass through what a diver would call a "decompression stage": a visit to the only intermediary zone described in the *Odyssey*, the land of the Phaeacians who are relatives of the Cyclopes and friends of the gods.

This is the quasi-timeless model suggested by a reading of the *Odyssey*. But we must now specify further details and variations in time, due to traditions and schools of thought (as they came to be called in later times); it is not being suggested that the model survived intact throughout the momentous sequence of inventions and the intensive political life that was characteristic of Archaic and Classical Greece.

The "national" or "ethnic" aspect (both terms are problematic, but I do not know a better one) and the political dimension are by no means irrelevant to the Homeric conception of humanity. Verses quoted by Greek political thinkers for centuries on end define the Cyclopes as a people who have "no meeting place for council, no laws either, no, up on the mountain peaks they live in arching caverns, each a law to himself, ruling his wives and children".<sup>16</sup> Those whom the "stories told to Alcinoos" describe as non-human (Cyclopes, Laestrygonians, Lotophagi) are also strange or alien peoples – they may be nomads or date-eaters. In this sense, the traditional attempts of scholars to locate and name the social realities behind the Homeric imaginary were not wholly misguided. That said, it is not the case that full humanity is simply synonymous with the "Achaean". The Trojans and the Cicones are human beings, and so are the mysterious Taphians. As for Hesiod, his first human beings are as Greek (or as little Greek) as Adam is Jewish, although there is a considerable difference in that Archaic Greek thought does not try to explain in a systematic fashion the relations of kinship between the various human families. Kinship is only considered on the level of kings (and only some kings): Perseus is the eponymous ancestor of the Persians, but he comes from Greece.

With the development of the city-state, political life becomes the criterion that separates civilization from barbarism, and – in the last instance – humanity from animality. When Aristotle calls the human being a *zōon politikon*, the usual translation of this term as "political animal" is misleading: what is really meant is

<sup>15</sup> This applies, for example, to the Cyclopes (*Odyssey* IX 167) and to Circe (149).

<sup>16</sup> *Odyssey* IX 112–14.

a being living within a city-state. And Aristotle hastens to add: "He who is without a city (*apolis*), by reason of his own nature and not of some accident, is either a poor sort of being or a being higher than man."<sup>17</sup> But it is not only the barbarian who borders on the animal realm (or, more exceptionally, on the divine one). The totality of the social world might be integrated into a huge picture constructed in the Pythagorean fashion, where the adult male Greek citizen (exempt from all degrading occupations) would be alone on the right side, whereas barbarians, children, women, craftsmen and slaves would be located on the left. Is there any need to mention examples? Each of these other beings would deserve a long study, or at the very least a long paragraph. We would then also have to deal with relationships of various kinds (affinities, contrasts and inversions) between the different types of marginals, and finally to dissolve the picture we have constructed by introducing historical movement into it.<sup>18</sup> Aristotle gives us an example of this kind of analysis when he discusses women, children, craftsmen and slaves in the same section of his work,<sup>19</sup> and to mention only one additional case, it could be shown that many myths – and some rituals – make the adolescent male pass through a feminine or feminized phase before he becomes a man in the complete sense of the word.

Here we must limit ourselves to a few points. Cretan institutions oppose the "herds" of children and young people to the "associations" of adults, and a similar taxonomy (with a weaker symbolic content) can still be found in the divisions of the scout movement. But we must understand what this connection of childhood and adolescence with the animal and savage world meant for the Greeks. The ideal Greek hero, be it Jason or Achilles, is raised by a Centaur, a monstrous being who borders on animality as well as divinity. The ordeals and rituals of adolescence put the young Greek outside the city, even outside its territory, in a real or symbolic border zone, where – in the extreme cases – everything is allowed, including behaviour which in other places and times would be considered monstrous or beastly.<sup>20</sup>

Similar arguments would apply to women, a particularly "natural" group that can be seen as the "savage" half of the city. When the comic poet constructs an upside-down image of the city, it is defined as a gynaeocracy. A city where women vote and govern is a city in a savage condition, and the same thing could – for the same reason – be said about a city ruled by slaves.<sup>21</sup> In Euripides's tragedy, the *Bacchae*, women escape the authority of the city ruled by King

<sup>17</sup> Arist. *Pol.* 1253a4.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. P. Vidal-Naquet, "Le cru, l'enfant grec et le cuit" in J. Le Goff and P. Nora, *Faire de l'histoire* (Paris 1974) 137–168; "Recipes for Greek adolescence" in P. Vidal-Naquet (*supra* n. 9) 129–56.

<sup>19</sup> Arist. *Pol.* 1260a4–1260b20.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. P. Vidal-Naquet, "The black Hunter and the origin of Athenian *ephebia*" in P. Vidal-Naquet (*supra* n. 9) 106–28.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. P. Vidal-Naquet, "Slavery and the rule of women in tradition, myth, and utopia" in *id.*, *The Black Hunter* (*supra* n. 9) 205–23.

Pentheus and flee to the mountains, where they first incarnate a Golden Age and then become wild beasts, engaging in a manhunt which finishes with Pentheus torn apart by his mother and his aunts.

Let us leave the barbarian aside, although it would be very easy to continue the argument in that direction; a few words should be said about the craftsmen, whose status is so ambiguous that they have to be represented within the pantheon by Athena, the goddess of cunning intelligence (*mētis*), and by Hephaistos, the deformed blacksmith. Let us leave aside all the texts, political and constitutional norms or philosophical speculations, which in many city states and political utopias define the craftsman as a second-order citizen, a passive citizen barred from holding office. Let us, by contrast, focus on a text whose avowed aim is to justify something widely seen as scandalous: the myth narrated by Protagoras in one of Plato's dialogues.<sup>22</sup> In Athens, potters and carpenters had the same right as specialists in politics (assuming that they exist) to speak on political matters. To explain and defend this principle, Protagoras returns to the story of Epimetheus and his brother Prometheus. The gods had instructed them to distribute among the different species of living beings – including the human one – the qualities that would enable them to survive: some were endowed with velocity, others with warm fur, or with hoofs, claws and similar equipment. But man, forgotten by Epimetheus, remained "naked and unshod, without any covering for his bed or any fangs or claws". To ensure his survival on earth, Prometheus stole fire from Athena and Hephaistos. Fire allows human beings to go far, because it is linked to the possession of language and to belief in the gods, but it does not make them capable of living in a city. It was "insufficient for fighting against the beasts – for they did not yet possess the art of running a city (*technē politikē*) of which the art of warfare is part". The human being as craftsman is thus, in a sense, an animal among animals. Moreover, the diversified trade-like skills which enable some human beings to become doctors and others to become carpenters can be compared to the specialized features of animals: some of them have furs which protect from cold, others have hoofs which enable them to run. This is more than a metaphor; it is, rather, a matter of separating from arts and crafts the human thing *par excellence*: the possession of *technē politikē*, the political competence that lifts man above the animals. This gift is not stolen from Athena and Hephaistos by Prometheus. It is conferred on *all human beings* by Zeus.

My summary and interpretation of this myth should not be taken to mean that it embodies the essence of Greek thought, or even of its fifth-century phase. Rather, we are dealing with a special case, where the defining characteristics of man are identified with those of the citizen. It remains true that the norm of citizenship is so deeply rooted that even during the Hellenistic epoch, when the city – properly speaking – is no longer the place where major decisions are taken, it remains – apart from a few exceptions – an obligatory frame of reference. For the Stoics, the true city has ceased to exist, and the *sage*, who is closer to God

<sup>22</sup> *Prot.* 320c–327e.

than to ordinary human beings, integrates himself into the order of nature, but this order is modeled on that of the city.<sup>23</sup>

The points I have outlined can, of course, be interpreted in varying and even conflicting ways. If children, women, barbarians, slaves and craftsmen can – at least within some classificatory frameworks – be located on the side of the animal rather than the human world, this presupposes an extraordinarily narrow definition of humanity, and even the classifications are not always in complete agreement. Conversely, we should note how forcefully Greek culture separates man from both gods and beasts. In spite of appearances to the contrary, neither Greek “science” nor Greek “mythology” change anything in this regard.

When Empedocles imagines a condition of the organic world where mixed beings exist, he does so in order to contrast our world with the world of accident that preceded it, and thus to throw into relief the normal state of things where human beings are begotten by human beings and animals by animals.<sup>24</sup>

Many creatures were born with faces and breasts on both sides, man-faced ox-progeny, while others again sprang forth as ox-headed offspring of man, creatures compounded partly of male, partly of the nature of female, and fitted with shadowy parts.

Plato explains the formation of the female sex as a result of the mutation (through a second birth) of “cowardly” males who have led a bad life; and he proposes similar explanations for birds, land animals, wild beasts, reptiles, fish and molluscs: “These are the principles on which living creatures change and have always changed into each other, the transformation depending on the loss or gain of understanding or folly.”<sup>25</sup> This genealogical myth reflects a taxonomy, but it should obviously not be taken at face value. To be on the safe side, Aristotle rejects both the idea of original chaos and the genealogical myths. The animal species, including man, are self-contained and incapable of genuine hybridization.<sup>26</sup> But man is distinctive, because he is the only being whose natural parts are arranged in natural order: the top of the human body is directed towards the summit of the universe. “Man alone of animals, stands erect.”<sup>27</sup> Conformity with natural order thus confirms what we have already learnt from the analysis of the political.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Maria Daraki, “Les fonctions psychologiques du logos dans le stoïcisme ancien” in *Les Stoïciens et leur logique* (Paris 1978).

<sup>24</sup> Empedocles, Fr. 446, in G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge 1962) 337 [Ed. Note: Vidal-Naquet quotes J. Bollack’s translation].

<sup>25</sup> Plato *Tim.* 91c.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. C. E. Raven, *Natural Religion and Christian Theology* (Cambridge 1953) 204–05. This author wrongly quotes Aristotle (*Historia animalium*) in support of a contrary position. The text does not deal with a “metamorphosis” of one bird into another, but with a phenomenon which Aristotle interprets as a “sloughing”, and which explains, for example, that the garden warbler becomes a blackcap. Aristotle’s error is irrelevant to our main concern. Thanks are due to L. Poliakov for drawing my attention to Raven’s book.

<sup>27</sup> Arist. *De partibus animalium* 653 a 32–3.

It will be objected that "science" is only one part of Greek culture, and that some things which it cannot provide may be found in mythology. And it is true that mythology contains – or seems to contain – numerous examples of the phenomena which science refuses to admit: mixed beings such as the Centaurs or the Satyrs, or metamorphoses such as those which changed Myrrha into the tree called myrrh or Daphne into the laurel. It is also true (if we consider things from the perspective proposed by Leon Poliakov) that Greek mythology is radically opposed to the Jewish tradition, which rejects the hybridation of man and animal as unconditionally as the marriages between sons of God and daughters of men. But here we must proceed with caution, for the function of the Centaur or the Satyr in Greek mythology is precisely to mark a *border* between the domains of the human, the divine and the monstrous. The assault of the Centaurs on the women of the Lapiths, as shown on the pediment in Olympia, is one variant among others of the confrontation between man and the inhuman which Greek art sought to express almost from the beginning. The sovereign gesture of Apollo, who intervenes to stop the fight, is a gesture of separation. Whether the Centaur is an educator (as was Chiron for the young Achilles) or an aggressor, he cannot penetrate into the properly human world. As for the problem of "metamorphoses" in mythology, it is even more complex. As Florence Dupont has shown, ordinary language uses this ambiguous term to refer to at least three sets of mythological or novelistic themes.<sup>28</sup> Let us, first of all, forget about purely novelistic transformations, such as those of the hero in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. They happen to a man who has fallen under a spell and been transformed into an animal, but keeps alive the memory of his past human condition until he is liberated from his animal clothing. Let us also leave aside what we might call disguising metamorphoses: Zeus, king of the gods, disguises himself as a bull in order to seduce the woman Europa, or as a swan to seduce Leda. These transformations cast no doubt on the divine identity of Zeus nor on the human identity of Leda. There remains a considerable body of myth, collected mainly by Ovid and by Antoninus Liberalis, which F. Dupont has aptly summarized in terms of a dilemma: "Reproduce or metamorphose". When Apollo pursues Daphne, she is transformed into a laurel, and thus manages to thwart divine desire as well as its normal outcome: the birth of a child. Metamorphoses disrupt the chain of generations. Myrrha, who is transformed into a tree after committing incest, gives birth to Adonis, but Adonis remains sterile. For the mythical hero, the choice of metamorphosis appears as a refusal of human normalcy – a refusal of marriage and sexual reproduction, and

<sup>28</sup> I summarize here the conclusions of Dupont's remarkable study, "Se reproduire ou se métamorphoser", *Topique* 9–10 (1971) 139–60. There are other borderline cases which could be discussed – for example Teiresias, who was first a boy and then a girl; he thus transcends the contrast between the sexes, and when he receives from the gods the gift of several successive lives as a man he also transcends the difference between generations. As a blind soothsayer, he becomes a link between the world of the gods and the world of humans. His singular life-story began when he surprised two serpents in the act of copulation and killed one of them, thus transgressing the boundary between man and animal. Here I am summarizing L. Brisson's study, *Le mythe de Tirésias, essai d'analyse structurale* (Leiden 1976).

this may be linked to incest or bestiality. Mythical thought creates a metaphorical universe where all laurels are identified with Daphne and all poplars with the Heliads, but far from opening up channels of communication between humans and animals, or humans and plants, the metaphor underlines the irreducible character of their contrasts. The universe of metamorphoses is a universe of discource, and cannot be anything more than that.

The analysis outlined above has to do with an "orthodox" tradition which found expression in religious practices (such as sacrifice) as well as in literary traditions, political and social doctrines, and mythological narratives. The reader may already suspect that this orthodoxy, albeit dominant, was never more than one dimension of Greek culture. The exploration of borderline situations can only be fully understood if we recall that the relationships can be inverted. All relationships? Surely not. The Greek imaginary could envisage a city ruled by women as an extreme and absurd case, or even a "feminine people" like the Amazons; it was *never* capable of picturing a city ruled by slaves in the proper sense of the word, i.e. human beings bought in the marketplace. To move from Aristophanes's *Ecclesiazusae* to "feminist demands" would have been an enormous step (it was never taken), and the most eloquent protests against the feminine condition, voiced by tragic heroines such as Euripides's *Medea*, had nothing to do with a movement of that kind (which did not exist), but should be seen as a response to the evident contradictions of society. It is a matter of analysis rather than subversion. In this sense, Ancient Greek society is profoundly different from ours: in our world, slogans like "becoming a child (or an animal) again", putting proletarians or women in power, or liberating humanity from the incest taboo, have their supporters, even if their numbers and level of commitment vary widely. But with regard to ways of relating to the divine realm and to wild nature, it seems that we can nevertheless go beyond the mere description of imaginary significations. Marcel Detienne has conclusively shown that religious movements, for example the Dionysian and the Orphic ones, and philosophical sects like the Pythagoreans and the Cynics transgressed the established order, both in their ways of life and in their modes of thought.<sup>29</sup> The Dionysos religion and its rituals, especially *omophagia* (eating raw meat), violated the dividing line between man and animal in a particular way. Euripides's *Bacchae* breastfeed wild animals, and Dionysian ecstasy reunites those whom the city *separates*: men and women, masters and slaves. This does not mean that the classical city was incapable of integrating the savage part that was recognized in every human being even a male adult citizen. The annual ceremonies organized to celebrate Dionysos' marriage to the wife of the Athenian archon-in-chief had nothing to do with transgression, and the city of Miletos had its official *bacchantes*. In Delphi, a sanctuary of the savage divinities, Pan and Dionysos, dominated Apollo's *hieron*, and Kostas Papaioannou has the following to say on what he was told by a Greek shepherd: "If the Ancients, *hoi Archaioi*, who were infinitely wise,

<sup>29</sup> Cf. M. Detienne, "Entre bêtes et dieux", *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 6 (1972) 231-48.

beautiful and powerful, divinized savagery; if they accepted it into the domain ruled by law, they may have thought that a non-civilized sphere is essential to the survival of civilization; the former may be like a belt which prevents the social body from exploding, as long as it encircles it. Moreover, this is what we do when we let wild plants grow outside our gardens, because otherwise they would invade them from inside."<sup>30</sup>

But the ancient city could also see Dionysian religion as a subversive threat. In 186 BC, the Roman Senate imposed the death penalty on all those who had taken part in the "Bacchanalia".

It is tempting to see the teachings of the Cynics – a philosophical sect which emerged in the fourth century BC and survived in different guises until the end of the Roman Empire – as a rationalization of Dionysian religion, or as an attempt to transform it into a cultural and political programme (if there is such a thing as a politics that rejects politics). Cynic thought, born of the crisis of the city, invalidates all prohibitions: the incest taboo as well as the bans on eating raw food and on cannibalism. But on another level, it rediscovers the rationale for a "naturalistic asceticism", as it was – for example – practiced by Diogenes of Sinope. For the Cynic tradition, it was natural to reappropriate and reinterpret Homeric stories: the Cynics praised the happiness of men Circe had transformed into animals, as well as the joys of "Cyclopean life".<sup>31</sup> In contrast to this transgression towards animality,<sup>32</sup> the Orphic movement sought to identify humanity with the gods. Orphic, i.e. vegetal, food is pure, and Plato defines the "Orphic way of life" in terms of the refusal to eat "anything living".<sup>33</sup> This kind of abstinence leads to a refusal of the very institution that encapsulates our relationships with the gods and our separation from them: sacrifice based on ritual bloodshed. The Pythagorean school developed and systematized Orphic prohibitions. This approach may help to make sense of some apparently unrelated details. The Pythagoreans banned the consumption of beans; Empedocles (whom this tradition presents as a disciple of Pythagoras) sacrificed a bull made of myrrh, incense and spices after a chariot race at Olympia, instead of the usual living bull.<sup>34</sup> The point is that "because of its knotless stem, the beanstalk represents the same kind of direct communication with the world of the dead (to which it also belongs by virtue of its affinity with rottenness) as the spices do with regard to the world of the gods, to which they

<sup>30</sup> K. Papaioannou et al., *L'art grec* (Paris 1972) 60.

<sup>31</sup> This is Plutarch's summary of the Cynics' "programme": "to make life savage again". *De esu carnium* 995 cd. His dialogue, *Gryllos*, deals with the theme of Cyclopean life, which had already made a modest appearance in Plato's *Laws*, 3. 680 bc.

<sup>32</sup> Here we must avoid anachronisms, such as – for example – the confusion of the Cynic vision of a life in conformity with nature (in the most extreme cases, an animal life) and some superficially similar themes in pre-Hitlerian thought (e.g. Spengler). E. Shmueli ["Modern Hippies and ancient Cynics: a comparison of philosophical and historical developments and its lessons", *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale* 12 (1970) 490–514] draws a parallel between Cynics and hippies; this is more appealing, but the author ignores the fact that the Cynics were – first and foremost – a philosophical sect.

<sup>33</sup> Plato, *Laws* 6. 782c.

<sup>34</sup> Athenaeus, *The Banquet of the Sophists* I 3e.

belong because of their solar quality and their dry nature".<sup>35</sup> We should, however, not assume that there can be no contact between the two kinds of transgression. Herodotus identifies Orphic prescriptions with those of the Bacchus cult and takes both to be "Egyptian and Pythagorean"<sup>36</sup>, and some Pythagorean philosophers of the fourth century were quite similar to the Cynics in their dress and their way of life.<sup>37</sup> It should not surprise us that the two projects, when translated into the language of civic orthodoxy, led to the same conclusions, and became remarkably similar in practice. Taken together, they show how far Greek culture went – it reached the point where humanity passes through the looking-glass and discovers its own inhumanity.

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<sup>35</sup> M. Detienne (*supra* n. 29) 239; and for a more detailed analysis, M. Detienne, *Les Jardins d'Adonis* (Paris 1972) 72–113.

<sup>36</sup> *Her.* II. 81.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the facts collected by M. Detienne (*supra* n. 29) 245.



# Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Anthropos<sup>1</sup>

Cornelius Castoriadis

The question "What is anthropos?" is always present in "Athenian tragedy", whether in mediated or immediate fashion. It is posed – and given an answer – with specific intensity and clarity in two of the most significant and masterful tragedies: *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus (possibly one of the last works by this poet, dated circa 460 BC) and *Antigone* by Sophocles (almost dated with certainty, either 442 or 443 BC).

As I will try to demonstrate, the answers the two tragedies provide to a question that is fundamental to the whole of Greek civilization stand perfectly opposed. This difference cannot be simply attributed to each poet's individual stance. In spite of the brief period separating the production of the two works – approximately twenty years – the difference expresses and is consubstantial with the extraordinary rhythm of intellectual creation in democratic Athens, the increasingly radical marginalization of traditional representations, and the expansive depth of human self-knowledge (*autognosia*). In a sense, this is analogous to the difference between Herodotus and Thucydides, which is thus previewed some twenty or thirty years in advance.

<sup>1</sup> [Translator's note] This translation was made from the Greek-language text, which was the most finalized and only published version of Cornelius Castoriadis's thoughts on these issues. Originally published in a volume of essays dedicated to the philosopher Konstantinos Despotopoulos, one of Castoriadis's oldest friends (*Aphierōma ston Konstantino Despotopoulo*, Athens: Papazisis, 1991), and the essay was reprinted in a volume of Castoriadis's essays in Greek titled *Anthropologia, Politikē, Philosophia* (Athens 1993). Translating Castoriadis directly from Greek, particularly in so far as his text pertains to ancient Greek material, demands that one remains faithful to the seamless transition from the ancient to the modern language, which takes in Castoriadis's hands a rare form of artistry and is deliberately exploited to enhance the philosophical point that he is making. I opted, therefore, to provide my own translations of the ancient Greek passages (except on two occasions, noted otherwise) and have kept all of the original ancient Greek, presented naturally untranslated in Castoriadis's text, in parentheses. (For the record, I note that I consulted Herbert Weir Smyth's translation of *Prometheus Bound* and Robert Fagles's and Richard Jebb's translations of *Antigone*.) Occasionally, I have also noted in parentheses certain of Castoriadis's original Greek terms whenever I felt it would be beneficial to the informed reader. Finally, risking a certain awkwardness, I have opted to retain the Greek *anthropos* instead of translating it to the usual "man" in order to avoid, as much as possible, the gender strains inherent in the generic use. It is important to understand that, although *anthropos* is a masculine noun in Greek (which is why in the possessive case I revert to "his"), its use in the Sophoclean ode under discussion is not gender-specific, unless one were to arbitrarily exclude *Antigone* from the ode's frame of reference.

Constraints of time and space do not permit me to engage with the totality of "hermeneutical" matters (in the contemporary sense of the term) that are necessarily raised by these extraordinary texts. I shall deliberately "extract" the passages of central concern, without addressing – apart from incidental allusions – the relation of these passages to the tragic whole from which they are derived and even less to the entire oeuvre of the two poets. Nor will I refer to the wide-ranging network of anthropological attitudes appearing in Homer's and Hesiod's time and subsequently up to the 5th century and even later.<sup>2</sup> All related questions are, of course, legitimate. But I also consider legitimate the following standpoint: to attempt to theorize *in-themselves* and in their full potential certain *spoken* positions of the two poets (in full knowledge, naturally, of all that surrounds them, but without explicit elaboration of this knowledge) and, starting here, to attempt, at another time, to elucidate the whole of the Greek landscape.

Our subject here is the question: what is *said* – thus, what is *proposed* to the *attention* of the Athenian audience – regarding anthropos and his related attributes, alternately, in *Prometheus Bound* and in *Antigone*? In this way, it is of scant interest whether Aeschylus and Sophocles "invented" their words or "borrowed" them, whether they conceived them in sound mind or dreamt them or received them in a moment of divine mania. It hardly interests us, moreover, whether they "believed" them (although, of course, they believed them). What matters, from this standpoint, is only that in Athens of 460–440 BC *someone could in fact conceive* the matters we discuss here, that someone could express them, present them to the people and, in the case of *Antigone* at least, be crowned for what he had conceived, expressed, and presented. In other words, what matters is the *actual presence*, in the Athenian social-historical space, of certain *significational complexes*, whose immanent contiguity with the overall imaginary institution of this space is otherwise well-known. Aeschylus's relation with the roots of a mythical/religious tradition, upon which he exerts a decisive shift, and Sophocles's relation with the entire philosophical (and "sophistic") ferment and creation of his contemporaries are also more or less known. I believe they will be elucidated further by the comparative analysis that follows.

In addition, I cannot address the discussion concerning previous and more or less recognized interpretations of the two works.<sup>3</sup> I shall recall only two points. There is a "translation" and extensive "interpretation" by Heidegger of the one stasimon in *Antigone* we shall discuss below.<sup>4</sup> This "translation" results essen-

<sup>2</sup> Besides the famous Cyclops passage in the *Odyssey*, what immediately comes to mind is Hesiod (*Theogony* 507–616 and *Works and Days* 41–121) and, of course, later than the tragedies discussed here, the Mikros Diakosmos by Democritus, as we know it from the commentary on Hesiod by Ioannes Tzetzes, as well as Plato's *Protagoras* (310d–323d), *Gorgias* (523a–524a) and *Statesman* (268e–274e). Here, I shall discuss *Prometheus Bound* (l. 231–241; 248–254; 265–7; 436–507) and the famous stasimon in *Antigone* (l. 332–375). For both works I am using the Budé editions (*Prometheus Bound* edited by Paul Mazon and *Antigone* by Alphonse Dain). I take for granted that the reader is familiar with the tragedies and has immediate access to the text.

<sup>3</sup> For a compendium of contemporary discussions on *Antigone*, see George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford 1984).

<sup>4</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen 1953). The lectures were

tially in a repulsive violation of the Sophoclean text. It supports – and thus is supported by – an “interpretation” which is, as is almost always, a simple projection of Heidegger’s patterns. No matter how these figures in themselves propel one toward thought and productively “incite” the usually indolent reader of ancient texts, in this particular case they lead to an artificial and unsound construction, which 1) presents Sophoclean *anthropos* as a complete embodiment of Heideggerian *Dasein* and 2) is regulated, rather incredibly and prodigiously (as is all that Heidegger has written about the ancient Greeks), by the systematic disregard for the polis, for politics, for democracy, and for their central position in ancient Greek creation. The necessary result of this disregard is, of course, a crooked “understanding” of ancient philosophy, which is indissolubly interwoven with democracy and the polis, even if it considers them enemies. Even Plato – indeed, particularly Plato – is not only inconceivable and impossible without the democratic polis, but also incomprehensible as a *philosopher* without his persistent struggle against democracy. All this, the National-Socialist Heidegger (1933–1945) does not want and is not able to see. (One of the consequences of such blindness we shall encounter below in regard to the text of Sophocles.)

The effect of Heidegger’s arbitrary practices goes so far as to combine a tampering with the text’s evident punctuation with the removal of those words that point to how out of place (*atopon*) this tampering is. So, for example, he reads the stasimon’s verses 360–361 in *Antigone* as *pantoporos aporos, ep’ouden erchetai* instead of *pantoporos; aporos ep’ouden erchetai to mellon*, so as to translate: “going everywhere and yet left behind, without experience and without a way out, he comes to nothing” – an extraordinary violation of the text that, in order to achieve a bare sense of truthfulness, must covertly efface the words *to mellon*, “the future”.<sup>5</sup>

Some of Heidegger’s impudent and arbitrary interpretations have already been pointed out by Daniel Coppieters de Gibson (among others), and this brings me to my second introductory remark.<sup>6</sup> Against Heidegger, Coppieters de Gibson himself calls upon the works and findings of the contemporary French “structural” Hellenists – Vernant, Detienne, Vidal-Naquet – according to whom “the form

first presented in 1935. [Translator’s note: Heidegger presented an expanded version of the same lectures on *Antigone* as part of a course on Hölderlin in the summer of 1942. Though more detailed, the crux of the interpretation and even the language itself remains the same. See Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “Der Ister”* (Frankfurt am Main 1984).

<sup>5</sup> [Trans.] I am translating here directly Castoriadis’s rendering in Greek of Heidegger’s German version of the Sophoclean verse, which is “Überall hinausfahrend unterwegs erfahrungslös ohne Ausweg kommt er zum Nichts,” translated by Ralph Manheim as “everywhere journeying, inexperienced and without issue, he comes to nothingness” (*An Introduction to Metaphysics* [New Haven 1959]) and by William McNeill and Julia Davis as “everywhere venturing forth and experienceless without any way out” (*Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”* [Bloomington 1996]). In contrast, the Sophoclean verse could be translated roughly as “all-resourceful; he comes to nothing in the future without resource”.

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel Coppieters de Gibson, “Les Grecs et la question de l’homme. A propos d’une lecture de Sophocle par Heidegger” in *Qu’est-ce que l’homme? Philosophie/Psychanalyse: hommage à Alphonse de Waelhens (1911–1981)* (Bruxelles 1982) 53–70.

of the Hellenic anthropos... determines the status [*statut*] of anthropos, placing him in a relation with the gods and, correspondingly, with the animals."<sup>7</sup> And it is beyond any doubt that the Greek conception of anthropos is generally defined by the organizational structure animals/humans/gods, which (in a way) delineates the boundaries of this conception from the emergence of Greek civilization (at least since Hesiod) up to the classical years and even further (consider Aristotle's *neither beast nor god*). This structure, which seems self-evident to those of us who find ourselves in the continuum of its Greek formation, is not at all self-evident. Let us consider, for example, the Jews, the Hindus, the Chinese, or the Indian tribes of America, where we observe a "circulation" among the animal, human, and divine condition – a circulation, not a rupture.

Yet, this structure is simply the encasing, the shell, within which an enormous – and for us decisive – social-historical creation takes place that *alters completely* the signification of those terms or elements making up this structure. And this happens exclusively by the alteration of signification – of the signification magma – that concerns the middle and core element of this structure, namely anthropos. This is an alteration accomplished by the effort toward self-knowledge (*autognosia*), which particularly characterizes this creation. If we retain this "structural" perception, we are in danger of repeating the critical misapprehension that has plagued the approach to the ancient Greek world for centuries. We are in danger of speaking of "the Greek anthropos," "the Greek polis," "the Greek conception of nature," etc., forgetting meanwhile that the basic characteristic of ancient Greek history is precisely that it is *history* in the most emphatic sense of the term, that the "spirit" of ancient Greeks is realized precisely as change, self-alteration, self-institution – all three notions interwoven with the trials of self-knowledge, which is continuous energy, work, process, and not static result. We can conceptualize a decisive moment in this alteration by analyzing and comparing the anthropologies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The juxtaposition of the two poets stands witness to an ontological upturning of enormous gravity, taking place in the course of these twenty years.

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The question "what is anthropos?" is not posed in the two tragedies in the manner of a philosophical text. It is contained within the tragedies and actually comes to be a question by the fact that it is given an extensive response. Aeschylus answers his own implicit question with an anthropogony. This anthropogony is mythical not simply in an external sense – in so far as he refers to a myth, the myth of Prometheus, which he redeploys. It is mythical in the deeper philosophical sense of the term: it answers the question concerning anthropos by turning to the *source* of his existence and by presenting a *narrative* – anthropos is whatever s/he is because at some point, long ago (beyond all possible empirical confirmation or reconstruction), something happened that surpasses our usual experience. Prometheus, a superhuman creature, gave to humans whatever made them actually

<sup>7</sup> Gibson (*supra* n. 6) 65.

human. Definition of myth: the narrative of origin responds to the question of substance. However, in Sophocles, as we shall see, the presentation of this substance responds both to the question of substance and to the question of origin. The substance of anthropos, *to deinon*, is his self-creation.

Let us take a close look at Aeschylus's text. Anthropogony is presented here as the work of Prometheus, as consequence of his decision and his action. This decision emerges in turn from an internal collision of superhuman powers – the collision between Zeus and Prometheus. Zeus wanted to destroy the humans (l. 231–236) and Prometheus decided to save them – and he does save them by passing on to them a part of the potential *poiein-prattein* (creating-acting) which was, until then, exclusive property of divine powers. There is a point to underlining this desire for destruction of humankind, which Aeschylus emphatically attributes to Zeus. The reasons or motives of Zeus, in the mind of Aeschylus, remain unknown. It is possible that the poet had described them in his *Prometheus Firebearer*, a work that has not survived.

What was the condition of humanity before Prometheus's intervention? A mediated answer, achieved by process of elimination, is given with the enumeration of all those elements that humans did not possess in their primitive existence (l. 248–254, 458–506). But Aeschylus also gives an immediate answer with an affirmative description of pre-human humanity (l. 248–254, 443–457). The description, particularly in verses 443–457, is extraordinary. The pre-human condition of humanity, as Aeschylus presents it, is literally incredible. It is entirely fantastic, without any external “veracity” or even an effort toward such veracity.

These humans, if they can be called that at all, are like insubstantial shadows; they remind us of zombies in contemporary science fiction. They see without seeing, without gaining (*matēn*) any utility from what they see. They hear without hearing and, resembling dream forms (*oneiratōn aligkioi morphaisi*), pass their long life without any order, abandoned to chance (*eikē*). They live underground, inside sunless caves, not able to distinguish between winter, spring, and summer, and do everything without thought, without mind (*ater gnōmēs to pan eprasson*). And they do not foresee – they do not know – death (l. 248 – I shall return to an interpretation of this verse).

This condition is entirely otherworldly, for us as well as for Aeschylus's time. This is not an issue of superprimitive savages, nor of any other possible and conceivable zoological species (*eidōs*). Neither apes nor even ants (referred to in verse 453) can be said to resemble dream forms who see without seeing. The pre-human condition of humanity is not, according to Aeschylus, a usual animal nature. From a biological standpoint, these creatures are monstrous and radically unfit for life. Had they ever appeared, they would not have been able to survive past the second generation; we do not need a Darwinian theory to come to this conclusion.

Nonetheless, Aeschylus's description presents something more significant than the actual: it presents the human condition “before” or “outside” the institution of social life – of the arts, of work, of speech (*logos*). Described here is anthropos as he would have been if he had a body and a soul (*psychē*), but not a

mind (*gnōmē*). It is a description of what today we would call the originary unconscious, the non-reason (*alogon*) and a-reality of the psychic monad. This is a condition conceivable only logically and hypothetically, a condition that resembles a dream form – and it is full of dream forms – in an abstract sense: what and how anthropos would have been without mind and without art (*technē*). I consider this abstraction more significant than reality because only this enables us to conceive all those elements in humanity that derive from what is beyond humanity's originary fact (the psyche) – elements that refer us to humanity's social condition, to what for us is the institution of mind and art and, for Aeschylus, the gifts of Prometheus, who made humans "[though] witless once, mindful... and endowed with sense" (*nēpious ontas to prin, ennous... kai phrenōn epēbolous* – l. 443–444).

It would be rather ridiculous to seek in the enumeration and description of Prometheus's gifts that follows (l. 457–506) a systematic logico-philosophical order. Yet, the order of the exposition itself, as well as what it includes and what it leaves out, should not be considered to have been made by chance. Prometheus begins by talking of the rising and barely discernable setting (*dyskritous dyseis*) of the stars. The reference here must be to the sunrise, properly speaking, but also to the periodic appearances of stars in the sky by virtue of which the yearly seasons may be determined. The simple rising and setting of the sun or any other star is not difficult to discern (*dyskritos*), and the incapability of the pre-human humans to discern the seasons has been announced just before (l. 454–456). Thus, Prometheus gives humans the *signs*, the immovable reference points through which the conception and measuring of time becomes possible in a basic sense. This measuring of time and of all else that is measurable comes immediately afterwards: "[and] I discovered for them numbers, the superlative of things thought" (*arithmon, exochon sophismatōn, exēuron autois*). How can one not recall Aristotle in this conjunction between time and number: "time is the numbering of movement according to a before and an afterward" (*chronos esti arithmos kinēseōs kata to proteron kai hysteron*)?<sup>8</sup> For enumeration to exist, there must be first a definition and determination of divided parts. And humanity without arithmetic is inconceivable.

Immediately afterward come *grammatōn... syntheseis, mnēmēn apantōn, mousometor' erganēn*: the co-articulations or interweavings of engraved or painted signs, which can incorporate any memory and can serve any work that bears the Muses: what we name art and knowledge. After this gift of the conceptions of time, number, and the (artificial) signs supporting and embodying memory come the arts of production, namely technique, in today's language. I shall not comment here on this enumeration (l. 462–469, 500–503). I draw attention only to the emphatic reference to medicine (*megiston*, l. 478–483) and to the exhaustive description of divination and interpretation of dreams (l. 484–499), to which I shall return. The verse that brings the enumeration to a conclusion has a grave meaning: "all the arts come to the mortals by Prometheus" (*pasai technai brotoi-*

<sup>8</sup> Arist. *Phy.* D 219 b 1–2; 220 e 3–4.

*sin ek Prometheus*, l. 506). Our axiom in this analysis is that we take the poet seriously. *Pasai technai* – all arts – is equivalent to all art in the singular. Prometheus did not grant humans certain elements out of which they in turn composed and assembled the rest; from him (*ek*) originate *pasai technai*. Surely, Aeschylus cannot possibly be ignorant of the fact that in his day certain arts were constantly being perfected (and that he himself had decisively changed the realm of his own art). What is of explicit issue here is the total rupture with the pre-human condition and the sudden emergence of art (*technē*) as such. There cannot be a gradual and millimetric passage from non-time to time, from non-number to number. Number either exists or doesn't. The existence of half a number or a small part of number (and the "progress," for example, to three quarters and then to the whole number) is inconceivable. Once number exists, we can then enumerate increasingly greater numbers – or even other kinds of numbers. The same is true of art (in the originary sense of the term): it either exists or it doesn't. The appearance of art cannot but be a passage from non-art to art – a rupture, a total othering that has no room for degree. Suddenly and totally, we pass from one level to the other – no matter how primitive this other is. From the pre-human to the human condition there is no gradual or part by part transition (let's merely recall language!).<sup>9</sup> Transition either happens or doesn't; when it happens, it is total othering – namely, creation. Aeschylus cannot think of this creation as self-creation (*autodemiourgia*), as does Sophocles. He knows, however, that it cannot be the result of any kind of accumulation, and this is what he expresses with Prometheus's act from which all art is derived.

I return now to the extensive passage referring to divination and interpretation of dreams (l. 484–499), which also deserves in-depth commentary, in order to allude to certain elements and points of interrogation. The very first thing to be ascertained – which simply imposes itself and I merely denote it here – is of enormous and amazing stature: Aeschylus speaks of divination, not religion, and his reference to the gods touches only the surface and with utilitarian purpose. The entrails of animals slaughtered for the sake of divination must be examined in order to reveal whether they appropriately please the gods: *daimosin pros hedonēn* (l. 494). Once again, I am not saying that Aeschylus "believed" this. I say that these *thoughts* (and their public expression) – as well as describing Zeus's power as brutal tyranny or Zeus himself as an ephemeral tyrant bound to fall in turn – were indeed possible and conceivable by the Athenians of 460 BC.

The other element of concern is the juncture, the length, and the necessity of this description. This passage is the most extensive in the anthropogony, numbering some sixteen verses. Why and why here? And why is it necessary? I believe that the (surely partial) answer to this question resides in the relation between anthropos and time, particularly the relation with the future. Prometheus granted humans the conceptualization and measuring of time. He also granted them the means to institute a relation with the past: *grammatōn syntheseis*,

<sup>9</sup> See my book *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Translator Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, MA 1987 [1975]) 273–339.

*mnēmēn apantōn*. With divination and dream interpretation he allows them a relation with the future, guiding them to "the art of riddles" (*dystekmarton techne* – l. 497) and enabling them to understand "signs from the flames" (*phlogōpa sēmata* – l. 498). From the moment a conceptualization of time comes into existence, there also exists the horizon of the future and its basic determinations: uncertainty, expectation, hope. In order for humans to confront this characteristic of the future, Prometheus endows them with the arts of divination and dream interpretation.

This complex of ideas enables us – indeed, demands of us – to return to an earlier passage of foundational significance, which we have not yet addressed. It concerns verses 247–252 which contain the first reference (after verses 235–236, where Prometheus declares that he saved humanity from the annihilation that Zeus had planned for it) to all that Prometheus engaged in for the sake of humanity. This very first act – before even the gift of fire – is described in the exchange in verses 248–251, which must be quoted here intact both because of their great significance but also because their usual translation appears to me perfectly absurd:

Prometheus: I stopped mortals from not foreseeing their doom.

Chorus: What sort of drug did you find for this affliction?

Prometheus: I have imbued them with blind hopes.

Chorus: You granted these mortals a great benefit.<sup>10</sup>

The first verse (*Thnētous g' epausa mē proderkesthai moron*) is usually translated as: "I emancipated humanity from the prediction of death."<sup>11</sup> First, this translation is straightforwardly contradictory with Prometheus's description of the pre-human condition (l. 447ff.). The verses above definitely refer to the passage from a pre-human to a human condition, since the gift of fire occurs afterwards (l. 252). How could it be conceivable that such creatures, who don't even have a sense of time, would be able to "forecast" their death? How can we impute Aeschylus with such inadmissible nonsense? Second, this translation [i.e., Mazon's] violates the definite meaning of the text. In order to mitigate this meaning, the word *mē* ("not") must be artificially endowed with the condensed

<sup>10</sup> [Trans.] I made it a point to translate this passage as literally as possible, in light of the argument Castoriadis makes, recognizing, of course, that the ambiguity or polyvalence of Greek words such as *moron*, *pharmakon*, *nosos* is impossible to render fully in English. For economy of space I opted not to quote here the original Greek, assuming (as does Castoriadis throughout) that the texts are readily available to the reader.

<sup>11</sup> For example, in the Budé edition, Mazon translates: "I liberated humans from the obsession of death." It is not improbable that the usual interpretation is due to a retroactive application on Aeschylus's text of the Platonic version (Gorgias 523d): "First of all then, men must be stopped from foreknowing their deaths, for now they have knowledge beforehand. Prometheus has already been told to stop this foreknowledge" [translated by W.D. Woodhead in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton 1963)]. But the human beings that Socrates describes in the myth of Gorgias have nothing to do with Prometheus's humans: the judged are clothed and may be of great lineage and wealth (523c). Evidently, Plato transforms Aeschylus's myth according to the needs of his argument.



notion *ina mē* ("in order not to"). The text says: I put an end to the condition whereby mortals did *not* foresee death (self-evident, since they lived "without mind" – *ater gnōmēs*). This is not meant to say that I taught them to foresee or predict the hour and moment of their death but to have a sense (a foresight) of the event: that is, I taught them that they are mortal. Third, it is impossible to attribute to Prometheus the ridiculous idea of making those mortals (who foresaw their death, though they simultaneously saw without seeing! – *blepontes eblepon matēn*) no longer know that they are mortal. If there is something certain in humanity, and altogether certain for the ancient Greeks, is their mortality. From Homer to the end of Athenian tragedy, the certitude of this foundational characteristic in being human is repeated at every opportunity.

Prometheus taught humanity the truth – that they are mortal and, according to the actual and objectively real ancient Greek conception, irrevocably and finally mortal. But to be mortal and to know it is, as the chorus says in response, an "affliction" (*nosos*) for which you need a "drug" (*pharmakon*). This drug was discovered and disseminated by Prometheus: he instilled in humans "blind hopes" (*typhlas elpidas*). Blind hopes, dark expectations, vain longings: these are the weapons (futile, in the last instance) whereby anthropos fights against his mortality, which would be otherwise insufferable. Thus, when the chorus responds: "You granted these mortals a great benefit" (*Meg' ophелеμα touto edōrēsō brotois*), the answer is *not* ironic. If human beings were to emerge from a pre-human condition, they would have to know the first and last truth: they are mortal. This truth could easily have crushed them (as so often crushes us). The counter-weight resides in the blind hopes. These hopes do not refer to some "positive" immortality (as we know from the "Nekuia" section of the *Odyssey*). They are relative to what anthropos does and is able to do in this life. Naturally, they are blind, since the future is unknown and the gods envious. But these two elements constitute anthropos, at least ancient Greek anthropos: the knowledge (*gnōsis*) of death and the potential of a *poiein-prattein* (creating-acting), which this knowledge incites rather than stifles. Ancient Greece is the brightest demonstration of the potential to transform this antinomy into a creative source.<sup>12</sup>

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Athens, 442 BC. The thirty-year peace treaties with the Peloponnesians in 446–445 recognize and consecrate Athenian domination. In 450, the sculptor Pheidias erects on the Acropolis the colossal bronze statue of goddess Athena, which allegedly could be seen all the way from Cape Sounion. The construction of the Parthenon begins in 447 and is completed in 438. Pericles's Odeon is built during 443. The Long Walls, finished in 456, are partly renovated in 445. Herodotus has already visited Athens, where he probably read parts of his *Histories* in public; Sophocles will compose a poem in his tribute in 441. Among other great figures

<sup>12</sup> See my brief text *Ἡ ἀρχαία ἑλληνικὴ δημοκρατία καὶ ἡ σημασία τῆς γιὰ μᾶς σήμερον* [Ancient Greek Democracy and Its Significance for Us Today] (Athens 1986) 20–23.

visiting or inhabiting Athens, we would have to include Protagoras, known for his "Anthropos is the measure of all things" (*pantōn chrēmātōn metron anthropos*). Obviously, Protagoras had himself composed an anthropogony, rather faithfully rendered by Plato in the dialogue of the same name, which also describes humanity's successive invention of art and knowledge and the equitable distribution of the political wisdom that supports democracy. In 444/443, the Athenians, motivated certainly by "the instituting passions" (*astynomous orgas* – in *Antigone*, l. 354–355), decide to found a panhellenic colony in Thourioi, on the site of Sybaris in Italy. For legislator, they don't select an Athenian, but Protagoras from Abdera. Aeschylus has died in Sicily; Sophocles (born in Colonus in 496) had already defeated him in the Dionysian competition in 468. During 443/442, the time of writing or completing *Antigone* at the age of 53, Sophocles has been elected treasurer. Euripides has already been taking part in dramatic agonistics since 455 and will win for the first time in 441.

This is the people whom Pericles will characterize twelve years later as the one who "made all earth and all sea accessible by our daring" (*pasan gēn kai pasan thalassan esbaton tē hemetera tolme katanagkasantes*). This is the creative social-historical space from within which emerges the verse "many things are formidable, but nothing is more formidable than anthropos" (*polla ta deina kouden anthropou deinoteron pelei*).<sup>13</sup>

While Aeschylus, twenty-five years before, presents an anthropogony, not as gradual process, but by describing a sudden passage from beforehand to afterward as the consequence of the decision and action of a rebel Titan, as if extracted, indeed stolen, from a superhuman source of abilities and potential belonging to superhuman forces (therefore, already in existence), Sophocles presents instead an anthropology which presupposes nothing and whereby these abilities and potential are created by humans themselves. He posits simply, clearly, and emphatically the case of humanity as self-creation. *Humans took nothing from the gods, and no god ever gave them anything*. This is the spirit of the 5th century and this is the tragedy that Athenians chose to reward with victory.

The stasimon (l. 332–375) must surely be interpreted in connection with its position in the overall economy of the work. It follows directly the new threats by Kreon, who has just learned of the second attempt at (symbolic) burial of Polyneices, and it immediately precedes the discovery and arrest of the guilty

<sup>13</sup> [Trans.] These are the famous first verses of the stasimon from *Antigone* that Castoriadis examines here. The (mis)adventures of translation in regard to this particular verse – a translation that is impossible in essence – carry a long story of their own. In many ways, Castoriadis's entire analysis of the stasimon is actually a meditation on the multifold and inexhaustible meaning of *deinon*. To render *deinon* as "formidable", in this instance, is purely a matter of expedience. In the rest of the text, I negotiate the various possible translations according to the specific needs of the meaning (Castoriadis's meaning) at the level of the phrase, always making sure to note the presence of the Greek word in parentheses. Occasionally, I opt to leave the Greek word or verse untranslated, taking for granted that the reader keeps in mind the various meanings and the impossibility of final translation.

party (Antigone). Its meaning – in essence, the meaning of the entire *Antigone* – resides in its concluding verses (364–375), that link the ode to the sublime significations that are at stake within the realm of this tragedy. Anthropos, who is described and praised in the previous and most extensive part of the choral song (l. 332–363), weaves his creative vehemence (*deinotēs*) together with an insurmountable division within his nature. “Skillful beyond the means of hope, he trudges on, sometimes to good, sometimes to evil” (*technas hyper elpidōn echōrē tote men kakon, allot’ ep’ esthlon herpei* – l. 365–366). His wisdom and his art surpass all expectation, but his double reality directs him sometimes to good, sometimes to evil. The poet does not determine this good and evil in a moralizing sense; he does so *politically*. Anthropos proceeds toward the good when he succeeds in interweaving (*pareirōn*) the city’s laws (*nomous chthonos* – but the chthonic element here does not refer to earth in the cosmological sense; it means the land of ancestors, the polis, the political community) with the sworn justice of the gods (*theōn enorkon dikan*), the judgment/justice (*dikē*) of the gods safeguarded by oath. In this case, anthropos becomes *hypsipolis* – a word whose polysemy makes its translation impossible: *Hypsipolis: standing high within one’s city* but, even more, sublime (as Longinus understood it) as member of a city, of a political (hence, human) community. At once, an opposition is drawn; against *hypsipolis* emerges *apolis*, a man who, “for the sake of daring” (*tolmas charin*), because of unlimited daring, impertinence, or impudence – in the last instance, because of hubris, to use the proper term – allows the non-good (*mē kalon*) to overcome him. Whoever is possessed by hubris becomes *apolis*. He exits the political society of humans and the specific result cannot but be death, flight, exile. He becomes, as the French say, *sans foi ni loi, sans feu ni lieu* (without faith or law, without fire or hearth). And the chorus concludes by declaring: we do not want this *apolis* to reside within or beside the hearth (*parestion*), nor do we want him *ison phronounta*, endowed with the same – equivalent, common to all citizens – wisdom, hence justified to consider himself equal to the other citizens.

I am forced here to give in condensed terms a total interpretation of the tragedy.<sup>14</sup> The subject of the tragedy is not the innocence of the victim Antigone who fights against the tyrant Kreon, nor the contradiction between ethics and *raison d’Etat*, nor the individual against the State (contemporary interpretations), nor the antithesis between the family and the Law (the Hegelian version). The subject of the tragedy is above all hubris itself: the act “for the sake of daring” (*tolmas charin*). Certainly, Antigone and Kreon represent two adversarial principles. The poet, however, does not consider these two principles – the city’s laws and the sworn justice of the gods – absolutely incompatible, since anthropos can become *hypsipolis* by weaving them together (*pareirōn*). Both Antigone and Kreon are incapable of this interweaving. Both of them, with equally blind and absolute defence of *one* of the two principles, become hubristic and *apoleis*. We

<sup>14</sup> Its complete version is part of a text not yet published. For an extensive presentation, the interested reader can consult “The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy” in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*. Translator David Ames Curtis (Oxford 1991).

have here a superlative paradox: going beyond the limits of thinking (*phronein*), entirely immobilized by thinking in singular terms (*monos phronein*). Kreon, the upholder of the city's laws, becomes *apolis*. But it is equally obvious that Antigone is herself *apolis*. Immediately following the choral ode in question, when the Sentry brings Antigone forward, having arrested her in the effort – for the third time – to throw some dust over the corpse of Polyneices, the chorus, expressing a mournful sorrow, does not address Antigone as a defender of reverence and respect for divine laws but characterizes her insane (*en aphrosynē kathelontes* – l. 383). Antigone's senselessness (*aphrosynē*) resides in that she too is not only incapable of weaving together the two principles, but that she transgresses the limits “for the sake of daring.” No polis can exist without “the laws of the land” (*nomous chthonos*). Transgressing those laws, Antigone empties herself from “thinking in equal terms” (*ison phronein*) and becomes *apolis*.

The poet says to the Athenian demos: even when we have justice on our side we may be unjust – there is never a final logical reason. Indeed, the arguments of both Kreon and Antigone, theorized as such, are impervious and with no possible logical refutation. This is expressed clearly by Haimon, when he says to his father: Neither do I want nor am I able to say that you are unjust (*out' an dynamēn, mēt' epistaimēn legōn* – l. 686), but you are unjust for other reasons [or, strictly speaking, in other words] – because you insist on your own justice or on being the only one who is just. It is imperative to quote here the stunning verses:

For whoever believes in thinking alone  
or in possessing the only eloquence or soul,  
when folded open, is found empty.<sup>15</sup>

Kreon is unjust, even though he is on the side of justice, because he insists on thinking alone, in singular terms (*monos phronein*). He does not belong within the realm of thinking in equal terms (*ison phronein*); he does not and cannot listen to the reason (*logos*) and the reasons (*logous*) of an other and of others. He inhabits hubris because he is incapable of interweaving the elements.

Much like the “Funeral Oration” in Thucydides, *Antigone* is a summit of democratic political thought and position that excludes and condemns the notion of *monos phronein*; recognizes hubris as intrinsically human and responds to it with *phronesis*; and confronts the final problem of the autonomous anthropos – both as individual and political community – as the problem of self-limitation.

Self-limitation is necessary precisely because anthropos is terrifyingly formidable (*deinos*), a quality that can never be essentially restricted by something external – not even by “the sworn justice of the gods” (*theōn enorkon dikan*). The oath is just *one* of the principles that govern human life, but is by no means enough. Were it to be enough, neither *Antigone* nor even tragedy would exist –

15

*ostis gar autos e phronein monos dokei,  
e glossan, hen ouk allos, e psuchen echein,  
outoi diaptychthentes. ophthesan kenoi* (l. 707–709)

just as no tragedy exists or can exist where *one* uttermost power gives answers to all questions, as in the Platonic or the Christian world.

Tragedy (and *Antigone* in particular) presupposes precisely the terrific power (*deinotēs*) of anthropos, which reaches its summit and self-destruction in hubris but, whenever interwoven with the equitability of collective thought (*ison phronēin*), may also succeed in reaching the sublime domain of *hypsipolis*. Herein lies the reason for the internal necessity in the tragedy to describe and praise the quality of *deinos*, which the chorus explicitly takes up in the biggest part of the stasimon (l. 334–363).

The central meaning of the choral ode is announced in the two first verses (*polla ta deina kouden anthropou deinoteron pelei*) that immediately immerse us into questions. The critical word in these verses is, of course, *deinos* – a word which is untranslatable. Heidegger translates it with the terribly insufficient *unheimlich* (uncanny), which forgets several of the word's central significations. His French translator widens the gap by rendering *unheimlich* as *inquiétant* (troublesome). Condensing in one phrase the conclusion of another, yet unpublished, study\*, I would point to a substantial element of ancient Greek poetry: not only is Sophocles not always obligated to choose among the different significations of a word, but evidently he often makes no choice whatsoever – he can and wants to provide all significations at once. *Deinos*: whoever justifiably provokes awe, fear, terror – someone who is terrific, horrifying, and dangerous. From here, according to one of the most beautiful signification derivations in ancient Greek, we pass to: stunningly forceful, powerful, provoking wonder and amazement, possibly even a sense of strangeness. Provoking wonder and amazement, why? Because of being super-able, dexterous, wise, a virtuoso, one who always finds a solution, who is never without means, all-inventive (*polymēchanos*) and cognizant of many ways (*polytropos*), as Homer would say. Sophocles says just as much at the end of the passage in question: “without resources he comes to nothing in the future” (*aporos ep' ouden erchetai to mellon* – l. 360–361). Lexicographers and translators are forced to choose among these significations; not Sophocles, or those fortunate enough to understand a bit of Greek.

The signification complex of this word is elucidated and enriched by what follows it in the text. From *Antigone* onward, *deinos* means everything that Sophocles will attribute to anthropos as the element of *deinon*. And the first instance of elucidation is granted us by virtue of the word's repetition in the rest of the phrase, constructed by the negation of comparison to connote a superlative degree: “nothing is more *deinon* than anthropos.” *Deinos* determines anthropos and is determined by anthropos: it is the characteristic element that no creature achieves in a degree comparable to anthropos.

*Ouden anthropou deinoteron*: Nothing is more terrible, more wonderful, more able to realize things than anthropos. I ask once more: Dare we take the poet seriously? Are we to suppose that the poet uses words without purpose and by

\* [Editor's note] Published in *Figures du pensable* (Paris 1999) under the title “Notes sur quelques moyens de la Poésie”, p. 35–61

chance? Sophocles, the master of the precise and just word (*kyriolexia* and *kairiolexia*), says it clearly and forcefully: nothing (*ouden*). Not the sea, not the winter, not the wild beasts – nothing. Nothing in nature. He says it absolutely: nothing. Therefore, not even the gods.

This latter elucidates the meaning of *deinos* but simultaneously appears to occlude it. In what sense could anthropos be more *deinos* than nature, than the gods? The answer is nonetheless self-evident, presented, almost without mediation, during the rest of the choral text that follows. The “gray sea” (*polios pontos*) and the “damp winter wind” (*cheimerios notos*) are surely more powerful than anthropos, as are “the races of wild beasts” (*theriōn agriōn ethnē*) and so many other creatures. But these creatures are – and are what they are – by virtue of their nature. They do and will continue to do the same things in whatever time-frame. And they have their inherent powers because they have been granted them once and for all, with no possibility of ever changing them. Their *ti estin*, their “what they are”, as Aristotle would say, which determines their existence and develops in their various facets, does not emerge from within them.

The exact same thing is true of the gods. Crushing more powerful than anthropos, endowed with innumerable powers and potential – however, not omnipotent, let us recall, immortal but not eternal or timeless – the gods are what they are by “nature” without having done anything to this effect. Thus, for instance, they have no need to resort to art (*technē*) – to build ships in order to be mobile or to write something down so as not to forget. On the other hand, however, Hephaestus’s art is surely superior to all human art, but it is an art not invented by Hephaestus; it is innate to him. Hephaestus *is* art, like Ares *is* war and Athena *is* wisdom.

Anthropos is a being in comparison to whom nothing is more *deinon* because nothing he does – necessarily described in indicative and fragmentary fashion in verses 334–351 – can be attributed to “natural” qualities. The *ti estin* of anthropos, which is expressed and expounded through various attributes, is *the very work of anthropos*. In philosophical terms: anthropos posits himself as anthropos; the essence of anthropos is self-creation. This phrase is to be understood in two senses: anthropos creates his essence and this essence is itself creation and self-creation. Anthropos creates himself as creator, in the form of a circle whose apparent logical depravity reveals something ontologically primordial.

That this is Sophocles’s conception becomes apparent beyond any doubt with one word, which – in addition to the verses “all-resourceful; without resources he comes to nothing in the future” and “nothing is more *deinon* than anthropos” – is the third pillar of this part of the choral ode: the word “self-taught” (*edidaxato* – l. 354). As we know, the middle voice denotes the return of the active energy upon the subject who carries out the action. No one has taught anthropos anything (no Prometheus, for example); anthropos is self-taught. When I am taught, someone who already possesses a specific knowledge gives it, offers it, imparts it to me. When I teach myself (middle voice), I give myself something I don’t have (otherwise, why should I give it?), but also something I do have (otherwise, who else gives it?). The apparent nonsense is dispensed with once we understand that

the self-propelled energy of the self-taught creates (brings into existence) both the "content" and the "subject" that mutually determine themselves, that presuppose each other and co-exist.

This third pillar is possibly the most important because the verb "self-taught" overdetermines and re-posites all that was stated before: all the works and creations of anthropos that pertain to the specific arts (ship-building, agriculture, hunting, etc.). For all these arts presuppose decisively all that anthropos has self-taught:

And language and winged  
Thought and the city's instituting  
Passions were self-taught...<sup>16</sup>

A century later, Aristotle will define anthropos as a living being that possesses reason (*zōon logon echon*) and a living being of the polis (*zōon politikon*). I dare say that the poet here is more profound, because he is more radical, than the profound philosopher. Anthropos does not "have" reason as "natural" quality or attribute – nor is his political substance given or granted from somewhere else. Anthropos has taught – created for – himself language (*phthegma*), thought (*phronēma*) and the city's instituting passions or lawmaking temper (*astynomous orgas*), which Heidegger translated, in explicitly Nazi fashion, as "the fortitude of sovereign power over the cities" (*den Mut der Herrschaft über die Städte*). This translation is, moreover, senseless: for there to be sovereign power over the cities, there must first be cities. Sophocles does not speak of sovereignty over allegedly already existing cities; his standpoint is the very "moment" (on the ontological stratum) that anthropos creates language and thought – as well as the instituting passions, the passionate temper, mood, or desire that grant law to the cities – which institute cities in turn. "Instituting passions" is possibly the best way to render the extraordinary and profoundly true idea of Sophocles: extraordinary because we usually think of law and institution as something absolutely opposed to temper or passion, and profoundly true because at the root of the primordial institution exists a pre-logical intension and "will" and no institution can hold without passion.

The formidable and terrifying essence (*deinotēs*) of anthropos is summed up in the verse that concludes this part of the stasimon: "All-resourceful; without resources he comes to nothing in the future" (*pantoporos; aporos ep'ouden erchetai to mellon*). For the Greek reader, this needs no translation. I will simply remind us that *pantoporos* refers not only to all-inventiveness but to the *universality* of human self-creation.

Before this terrifying formidability, the poet knows one and only limit: "only from Hades there is no way out" (... *Aida monon pheuxin ouk epaxetai*). The totalizing and finalizing Hades – who, according to the the preclassical and

<sup>16</sup>

*Kai phthegma kai anemoen  
phronema kai astynomous  
orgas edidaxato...* (l. 354–356)

classical (until the end of the 5th century) conception, refuses to be placated with immortalities and deluded hopes for a life after death – appears here not merely as reminder of the final truth but also to underline the formidable and terrifying essence of this creature which, fully aware of its mortality, does not cease nonetheless to advance (*chōrei*), to vex (*apotryetai*), to lead (*agei*), to prevail (*kratei*), to teach itself (*didasketai*).

The second limit, which is, if I may say, internal and intrinsic to anthropos, is his double nature that directs him either to evil (*kakon*) or to noble ends (*esthlon*). This is a limit because Sophocles (like Thucydides twenty or thirty years later), while describing a titanic process of the creation and acquisition of power and potentiality of anthropos, sees this process, quite justly, to achieve no “ethical progress”. The evil and noble ends have accompanied and will always accompany anthropos; they shall always be the two poles that alternately guide his steps. The twentieth-century reader will deem the poet’s perception credible without difficulty, counting on the experience of twenty-five centuries worth of masterpieces and monstrous crimes, the worst of which took place in the name of noble ends and humanity’s worldly or otherworldly redemption.

The poet, however, does not see this double nature in fatalistic fashion. He knows that anthropos has the potential to become *hypsipolis* and to succeed by interweaving “the laws of the earth” (*nomous chthonos*) with “the sworn justice of the gods” (*theōn enorkon dikan*). This justice appears thus as a third and relative element of human action/creation (*praxis/poiesis*). Anthropos teaches himself his laws – he posits and institutes them. However, next to these laws exists the justice of the gods, which certainly does not suffice (otherwise, there would be no need for “the laws of the earth”) but cannot be disregarded either.

In *Antigone*, the justice of the gods has a specific content that concerns the established customs of burial. Already in *Antigone*, however, even this justice encounters its limit. Worshipping the gods without a polis, without lawful human community, has no meaning. Yet, a city that does not protect itself from treason, from collaboration with the enemy driven solely by the motive for personal power (Polyneices), also lacks meaning. To let the behavior of Polyneices go without sanction would, in the last instance, render any divine worship impossible. But for its sanction to be carried out according to Kreon’s decision (by forbidding burial) also means an affront to the gods. The justice of the gods has no singular meaning; we know this from Homer, as well as from numerous tragedies. The gods themselves are in a constant state of war amongst them; they themselves have no laws, and their relations are regulated by means of *power*, not law. Aeschylus’s Orestes is one of the many victims of the internal battles amongst divinities. The commands of the gods are obscure and polyvalent and may easily lead to destruction – as they do lead precisely in the case of Antigone.

We don’t know exactly what Sophocles thought about the gods, and it is very difficult to infer it. We do know that he belonged to the circle of Pericles – as did

<sup>17</sup> “Protagoras” in H. Diels-Kranz, II.80.4. Translated by Michael J. O’Brien, *The Older Sophists* (South Carolina 1972) 20.



Protagoras: "Concerning the gods, I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have" (*peri men theōn ouk echō eidenai, outh' hōs eisin outh' hōs ouk eisin outh' opoioi tines idean*).<sup>17</sup> At least, *Antigone* allows us to say unhesitatingly: just as the justice of the gods is insufficient, so are worldly laws. In obeying them, anthropos must know that these laws neither determine absolutely what is legal nor exhaust the range of the forbidden. Another element must exist next to the law instituted on each occasion – affirmative and, whichever way, precisely located in space and time, therefore relative – an element that needs to be interwoven with the worldly law, without dictating it or refuting it. It is this element that by means of the language and the representations of his city and his time the poet names "the sworn justice of the gods."

\* \* \*

In conclusion, let us summarize comparatively the anthropology of the two poets. Their common point is naturally the definitive meaning of thought and art. Beyond this, the differences are immense. Aeschylus speaks extensively of divination; Sophocles shows no such interest. Aeschylus does not mention at all the foundation and institution of political society; Sophocles directs the entire choral ode toward the "instituting passions", toward the notions *apolis* and *hypsipolis*.

Aeschylus begins from an oneiric, nightmarish prehuman condition and presents the passage to the human condition as a gift, as the decision and action of a superhuman creature. There is nothing analogous in Sophocles, for whom there cannot be a prehuman condition as far as humans are concerned; rather, from the moment anthropos exists, he is defined by virtue of his self-creative poetic action (*praxis/poiesis*), by virtue of self-teaching. Prometheus taught the Aeschylean anthropos the knowledge of mortality, simultaneously counterbalancing the unbearable weight of this knowledge with blind hopes. The Sophoclean anthropos knows that he is mortal and that this fundamental self-definition is insurmountable. Naturally, given the subject matter and context of *Prometheus Bound*, no reason, way, or place can exist to account for the problems anthropos faces. Sophocles conceptualizes these problems in radical fashion as consubstantial with the double nature of anthropos, his immanent hubris (*tolmas charin*) and his tendency to think in singular terms (*monos phronein*).

In the course of a quarter of a century, Greek self-knowledge passes from the idea of a divine anthropogony to the idea of the self-creation of anthropos. The stasimon in *Antigone*, as well as Pericles's Funeral Oration in Thucydides twelve years later, endow this self-knowledge with its brightest forms.

# **Autonomy and Axiality: Comparative Perspectives on the Greek Breakthrough**

*Johann P. Arnason*

Il n'y a pas d'histoire inactuelle; il y a une série indéfinie  
d'expériences humaines; l'hellénisme y a bien sa place.

Louis Gernet

## **Two approaches**

If there is such a thing as a historical breakthrough, ancient Greece must be a prime example; it may be possible to conceptualize the notion of breakthrough in different ways, but it seems impossible to imagine a model that would not give pride of place to the Greek experience between the eighth and the fourth centuries BC. The scope of comparison is more controversial: some interpretations of Greek history open up broader horizons and provide more effective conceptual tools for comparison than others. We might say that the exemplary status of the Greek case is not in doubt, but its paradigmatic significance is a matter of debate – if by the latter we mean the use of Greek history to construct or illustrate a more general model of radical socio-cultural transformation. The following discussion will draw on two recent attempts to theorize the Greek experience. For Cornelius Castoriadis, the concept of autonomy is central to the understanding of ancient Greece, whereas S.N. Eisenstadt subsumes Greek developments under the broader concept of an “Axial transformation” which supposedly took place in several civilizational centres at the same time. To simplify I use the term “axiality” to sum up the defining characteristics of this model.

The two interpretations differ in tone and content, as well as with regard to their implications for comparative studies. But as I shall argue, they are in the last instance less alien to each other than we might think. Their elective affinities and convergent insights will – together with their limitations – become clearer if we broaden the framework and bring in other aspects of the Greek experience, besides those singled out by the two authors; this will also open up new comparative perspectives on the relationship between the Greek world and other relevant cases. Since the theory of the Axial transformation is the more explicitly comparativist of the two approaches, it is the most convenient starting point for our analysis, but some questions must be raised about its historical adequacy. Critics have argued – more convincingly in some cases than others – that it does not do justice to the different contexts of innovation; it remains to be seen how far the Axial construct will be modified by more detailed comparative analyses, but for the time being, it is the most sustained attempt to clarify parallels between

different civilizational patterns and their internal dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

At first sight, the most striking disagreement between Castoriadis and Eisenstadt has to do with the question of uniqueness or uniformity. Castoriadis stresses Greek uniqueness: the Greek breakthrough was, as he sees it, unprecedented and unparalleled in premodern history, and the only thing with which it can be compared is the later Western transformation which began with the innovative urban communities of the High Middle Ages and culminated in the modern project of autonomy, i.e. a radical and at the same time self-reflexive democracy, understood as a countercurrent to the dominant logic of capitalist development and instrumental rationalization. Moreover, the second example is not a wholly separate case: the modern reinvention of autonomy was, at crucial junctures, dependent on inputs from the Greek source. By contrast, Eisenstadt tries to show that a uniform pattern – defined at a very abstract level – is characteristic of the Axial civilizations, i.e. those that underwent a radical change during (roughly speaking) the second third of the last millennium BC. The other main cases in point are Israel, India and China; Iran is a possible fifth example, but here the evidence is less clear-cut and the available accounts much less conclusive, and we will therefore have to leave the Iranian experience out of consideration.<sup>2</sup>

### Castoriadis: The Origins of Autonomy

To underline the originality of the Greek experience and highlight the background to further aspects to be discussed below, we should begin with the interpretation which places more emphasis on unique achievements. For Castoriadis, the outstanding and exceptional features of Greek history were due to a self-discovery of the social world: autonomy begins when “society recognizes itself as the source of its norms”.<sup>3</sup> A new awareness and articulation of its self-instituting capacity gives rise to a new vision of the social order as intrinsically questionable and refashionable. This may appear as an abrupt acceleration of history when compared to the *longue durée* of heteronomous societies (those which project their self-instituting capacity onto extra-social forces or principles, but in more concrete terms, it was a multi-secular process: its beginnings go back to the early seventh century BC (Castoriadis refers to the annual election of key officials in Athens and the emergence of the Spartan constitution), and important developments were still taking place in the fourth century. Although he admits that one can speak of “two creations”, the *polis qua polis* and its democratic version, it seems – from his point of view – more logical to portray the whole

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive critical discussion of the Axial paradigm, cf. Stefan Breuer, “Kulturen der Achsenzeit”, *Saeculum* 45:1 (1994) 1–33.

<sup>2</sup> For interesting reflections on the Iranian case, cf. D. Levy, “The good religion: Reflections on the history and fate of Zoroastrianism” in D. Levy, *The Measure of Man* (Columbia 1993) 170–90.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Greek polis and the creation of democracy” in C. Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (Oxford 1991) 114–15.

process as one long revolution, beginning with the rise of the *polis* and culminating – at least in Athens, the most creative and representative *polis* – in the victory of democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Castoriadis locates the most basic innovation at the cultural level (in a changing self-image of society); but the dynamics and turning-points of the subsequent process are more directly related to the political sphere. From that angle, we may note three successive but interconnected aspects of the Greek trajectory. In general terms, Castoriadis distinguishes between implicit power (built into the instituting process and its results as such) and explicit power (attributed to and exercised by specific institutions). Implicit power can, of course, be transformed into explicit power; the emergence of the state is the most fundamental change of that kind, but in the case of the Greek *polis*, it takes a very peculiar course. The creation of highly explicit, i.e. effectively rationalized and extensively thematized power structures is accompanied by an effort to minimize the distance between them and the self-instituting collectivity. The political – in the sense of “whatever pertains to explicit at least partly conscious and reflexive decisions concerning the fate of the collectivity”<sup>5</sup> – becomes more visible and contestable than it is in societies which link it more closely to sacred authority and thus immunize it against social countercurrents. Although Castoriadis insists on distinguishing *politics* – defined as an activity based on explicit questioning of established institutions – from *the political*, the *polis* thus paves the way for a rapid transformation of the political into politics: the political framework of social life becomes a matter of debate, a source of conflict and an object of reform. Finally, the process that begins with a restructuring of the political and continues through the discovery of politics culminates in a democratic breakthrough. This does not mean that democracy was the predestined mature form of the *polis*. The plurality of independent centres was not only conducive to change and mobilization (the proliferation of smaller-scale political units made the political sphere more accessible and malleable); it also enabled the long-drawn-out transformation to unfold in different ways and the results to be stabilized at different stages in different places. In that sense, Castoriadis refers to Athens, Sparta and Corinth as three particularly striking variants of the underlying pattern of the *polis*.

The democratic turn taken in Athens is nevertheless the most radical, revealing and trail-blazing innovation attempted within the framework of the *polis*. It is commonly seen as the prime example of direct democracy, i.e. an effective transfer of authority and power to the popular assembly, but as Castoriadis argues, the implications of this view become clearer if we add a less familiar point: the sovereign rule of the *dēmos* was based on systematic efforts to contain or neutralize the forces tending to separate politics from society, rather than on an undifferentiated and therefore antiquated state of social life. Athenian democracy

<sup>4</sup> Castoriadis (*supra* n.3) 105; for the “two creations”, cf. C. Castoriadis, “Athenian democracy: false and true questions” in Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian* (Atlantic Highlands 1996) 121.

<sup>5</sup> Castoriadis, “Power, politics, autonomy” in Castoriadis (*supra* n.3) 158.

strove to minimize the delegation of power to officials or representatives; it restricted the authority of expertise to clearly delimited areas and rejected the notion of politics as a domain of specialized elites; most importantly, its institutional patterns blocked the development of the state as an apparatus outside or above the political community. From all these points of view, the Athenian experience is – for Castoriadis – of lasting importance for the ongoing debate on the meaning and limits of autonomy.

The trajectory of the *polis* from archaic to classical times is thus best understood as a culturally grounded political transformation. But it is also accompanied by the invention of new cultural genres which serve to articulate society's new relationship to itself and to its world. Greece was "the first society to explicitly question the instituted collective representation of the world", and this entails a corresponding attitude to other societies: "the keen interest in the other was born in Greece".<sup>6</sup> Castoriadis insists on the close and mutually constitutive connection between intellectual questioning and institutional innovation, and more particularly between philosophy and democracy. He admits, however, that this fundamental affinity did not translate into a harmonious relationship: the mutual estrangement exemplified by the trial of Socrates and aggravated by Plato's assault on democracy had lasting effects on the whole Western philosophical tradition. But pioneers of philosophical thought seem to have been active citizens, and Castoriadis singles out two major fifth-century figures – Protagoras and Democritus – as representative of a broader intellectual movement with an obvious democratic bent, even if the surviving fragments of their work are too disjointed and ambiguous to sustain a detailed reconstruction. In the last instance, it remains true that philosophical expressions of the "spirit of democracy" did not keep abreast of the institutional ones; a more balanced picture emerges if we take into account the extensive but often oblique self-reflection articulated in other ways. For Castoriadis, tragedy is perhaps the most characteristic cultural product of Athenian democracy, and the critical study of history initiated by Herodotus and Thucydides – not only their explicit accounts of democratic claims – derives from the same source.<sup>7</sup>

The invention and radicalization of autonomy – in the double sense explained above – took place in a specific cultural context. As Castoriadis sees it, the Archaic Greek world-view was already based on a complex of interpretive patterns (imaginary significations, as he prefers to call them) which preceded, nourished and transcended the quest for autonomous forms of intellectual and social life. The core of this distinctive mode of imagination is "the fundamental Greek idea of the *chaos*".<sup>8</sup> It refers to an underlying indeterminacy and a perma-

<sup>6</sup> Castoriadis (*supra* n.3) 82. In fact, the translation (by David Ames Curtis) does not do full justice to the original; Castoriadis says "le véritable intérêt", which should be translated "genuine" or "authentic" interest.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Castoriadis reads Aristotle's political theory as a qualified defence of democracy and as an attempt to mediate between Plato and the fifth-century Enlightenment (cf. C. Castoriadis, *Fait et à faire* [Paris 1997] 22–3).

<sup>8</sup> Castoriadis (*supra* n.3) 103.

nent potential for disorder; the *kosmos* imposed on it is inevitably fragile and incomplete. The interplay of *chaos* and *kosmos* was first articulated on the level of religious beliefs and mythical narratives, but in the present context its long-term implications for the relationship between man and world are more important. The ontological relativity of order leaves open the possibility of autonomous action, but without any ultimate guarantee of success or salvation; the underdetermined world is open to questioning and alternative interpretations, but by the same token resistant to the idea of an orthodox and binding doctrine; and the undermining of natural order makes it easier to envisage the construction of a social one (the presence of *chaos* within *physis* paves the way for the distinction between *nomos* and *physis* which Castoriadis regards as central to the Greek Enlightenment). From all these points of view the Greek imaginary contains themes which can still serve to counter the inbuilt biases of later metaphysical thought. The imaginary downgrading of order was not only an enabling background to political change. Even the most innovative cultural expressions of the increasingly articulate *polis* continued to draw on older sources: mythological models and narratives functioned as adaptable but irreplaceable anchors of meaning, and the themes explored along the multiple pathways of reason and imagination were closely linked to the fractured vision of order (that applies to the notions of *hybris* and *dikē* as well as those of *nomos* and *physis*). The ongoing cultural elaboration of this legacy is an integral part of the progress towards autonomy. As Castoriadis argues, the most ambitious statements in defense of democracy – especially the funeral oration ascribed to Pericles – stressed its unique contribution to the “works of the polis”, and the most important among the latter are those which both articulate and problematize the cultural orientations of the community.

#### Eisenstadt: The Axial Paradigm and its Variants

When Eisenstadt writes that the Axial transformations “ushered into the arena of human history the possibility of consciously ordering society, and also the continuous tension that this possibility caused”,<sup>9</sup> he might seem to be taking a line reminiscent of Castoriadis’ views on autonomy. But the differences become more obvious when we move on to the details of the argument. Eisenstadt’s definition of the Axial breakthrough centres on what he calls “a basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders”,<sup>10</sup> in contrast to the archaic world-views which assumed an essential similarity and continuity of the two levels. This rupture and problematization of order, together with more or less explicit, more or less activist, and more or less effective projects of restructuring the lower levels according to imperatives derived from the higher one, is the defining characteristic of Axial civilizations. It should be noted that the contrast

<sup>9</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt, “The Axial Age breakthroughs: their characteristics and origins” in S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (New York 1986) 15.

<sup>10</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt (*supra* n. 9) 2.

between Axial and non-Axial patterns cuts across Castoriadis's divide between autonomy and heteronomy: for Eisenstadt, the difference between societies which experience order as given and those which experience it as problematic is more fundamental than anything else, but problematization can take the form of a more articulate, ambitious and demanding relationship to a higher reality (in that sense, Eisenstadt would argue that the concept of heteronomy minimizes the distance between two very different ways of relating to the superior other).

The tension between transcendental and mundane levels opens up a new space for conflicting interpretations. Order becomes problematic also in the sense that its paradigm lends itself to rival readings. But the importance of this aspect varies from case to case: some conceptions of transcendental order are more open to divergent applications than others, and therefore more conducive to a polarization of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Much of Eisenstadt's work on Axial civilizations deals with their varying capacity to generate counter-traditions and distinctive utopian visions within a shared overall framework.

The theory of the Axial transformation begins with the analysis of a cultural breakthrough and goes on to examine its impact on power structures – not only the centres and elites, but ultimately on the whole organization of social life. This approach should not be mistaken for cultural determinism. The transformations of social power – especially of its political centres – are neither pre-programmed nor unilaterally set in motion by the new cultural models of order; rather, the new cultural orientations and resources become crucial factors in power struggles, but they only do so through the strategies of coalitions and counter-coalitions made up of a broad spectrum of social forces. Eisenstadt's analyses of these collective actors in conflict tend to stress the role of a new type of intellectual elite, exemplified by "the Jewish prophets and priests, the Greek philosophers and sophists, the Chinese literati, the Hindu Brahmins, the Buddhist Sangha, and the Islamic Ulema", and to present the "new scholar class" as a "relatively autonomous partner in the major coalitions and protest movements".<sup>11</sup>

The most decisive aspect of the Axial transformation is an unprecedented simultaneous increase in the order-building as well as the order-transformative potential of culture; what this means for the development of power structures depends on the content of the new cultural model, but also on the circumstances in which it becomes a part of the interplay of social forces and political centres. In the most general terms, the resultant relationship between culture and power is fundamentally ambiguous: the new visions give rise to more ambitious and elaborate ways of legitimating more complex and expansive power structures, but they are also – although not always in the same fashion or to the same degree – conducive to a more critical stance which makes the rulers responsible to higher instances or principles. This last point is crucial: for Eisenstadt, the *accountability of rulers* – albeit unequally developed in different Axial civilizations – seems to be a historical innovation of the same importance as the breakthrough to

<sup>11</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt (*supra* n. 9) 2.

autonomy for Castoriadis.

Eisenstadt sees Ancient Greece as an obvious but in some ways special case of Axial transformation. Here the most spectacular and seminal results are to be found in the fields of philosophy and politics, and on both sides, the Greek experience is marked by a strong this-worldly orientation of the transcendental vision (the distinction between transcendental and mundane is not identical with the one between other-worldly and this-worldly; some Axial innovations are more this-worldly than others, and in that regard, Greece is closer to China than to India or Israel). The Greek emphasis is on an intellectual exploration of the cosmos and a reflexive elaboration of the political order; the articulation of reasoning was as central to the former as the development of citizenship to the latter. But in view of these parallel trends, the relatively low level of mutual integration is – as Eisenstadt sees it – all the more striking. Philosophical and political innovations were rather loosely linked: they did not “converge into a relatively coherent and unified semantic map with full-fledged institutional implications, as they did for instance in China or, in an entirely different mode, in early modern Europe”.<sup>12</sup> Eisenstadt goes on to discuss the implications and consequences of this under-integrated variant of the Axial model for Greek history; in the present context, three points seem particularly relevant.

First, polytheistic religion survived in the intermediate space between philosophy and politics; it lost its earlier authority over the political sphere, but it remained essential to collective identity and cultural legitimization. It became, in other words, an integral part – a medium rather than an instrument – of the institutional framework of the *polis*. Here the contrast with China is particularly striking. During the epoch of the Warring States, especially from the sixth to the third century BC, Chinese thought moved towards a synthesis of the secularizing (but not uniformly or unequivocally a-religious) trends that had taken shape on both intellectual and political levels; this development, which culminated in imperial Confucianism, led to the marginalization of more archaic religious beliefs. The Greek tradition took a different road: the centrality and continuity of an inherited religion was guaranteed by its incorporation into a restructured political order. The failure to achieve an Axial synthesis of the kind which Eisenstadt seems to regard as more typical made it difficult to legitimize strong centres. The concept of centre (coined by E. Shils and defined in contradistinction to the notion of periphery) refers to interconnected concentrations of culture and power; from that point of view, one of the salient features of the Greek *polis* is a weak differentiation of the centre from the collective. As Eisenstadt puts it, “the ultimate legitimization of the order of the *polis* ... derived in many ways from the pre-Axial age”,<sup>13</sup> most importantly through multilayered structures modeled on the language and symbolism of kinship (the fact that ostensibly kinship-based institutions were in reality political constructs does not

<sup>12</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt, “The Axial Age breakthrough in ancient Greece” in S. N. Eisenstadt (*supra* n. 9) 30.

<sup>13</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt (*supra* n. 12) 35–6.



contradict this claim: the point is that a new order was re-embedded in the imaginary of an older one). Finally, the Greek version of the Axial transformation seems to have been less conducive to secondary breakthroughs than the others. Eisenstadt uses the concept of a secondary breakthrough to describe re-elaborations and re-systematizations of the original Axial vision, usually in a more universalistic vein and often in connection with imperial projects. In this case, there is no doubt that the Jewish legacy and its destiny is the prime example: Christianity and Islam are the secondary breakthroughs par excellence. Nothing comparable came out of the Greek experience. Hellenistic expansion brought Greek culture into closer contact with a much larger area and gave rise to significant innovations, but it lacked the unity and direction of a proper secondary breakthrough. As for Rome, Eisenstadt seems to think that it had some resemblance to a secondary breakthrough (mainly due to a more inclusive idea of citizenship), but fell far short of completing it.

#### Structural conditions and cultural orientations

At this point, it may be useful to consider the most obvious objections which each of the above-mentioned theorists could make to the model developed by the other. From Castoriadis's point of view, a critique of the theory of the Axial transformation would begin with the very concept of order. As he sees it, a retreat from – or a move beyond – visions of order was characteristic of the Greek religious imagination in its earliest discernible stage. And that applies – even more so – to Greek thought during the *polis* period. The radical problematization of order, as interpreted by Castoriadis, goes far beyond the constructs which counterpose a transcendental paradigm to an imperfect mundane reality (it might be suggested that the closest Greek approximation to such a dichotomy is to be found in Plato's philosophy, which for Castoriadis represents a late development, a reaction against the most distinctive aspects of the Greek experience, and a transition to a way of thinking which came to fruition within a very different cultural context).

As for Eisenstadt, he would presumably see the project of autonomy as a multiply marginal case within the Axial context – an atypical offshoot best understood in the light of the mainstream, rather than a master key to less clear-cut trends in other settings. If we use the concept of autonomy to highlight the defining characteristics of the Greek breakthrough, we are – on this view – interpreting a long process from the viewpoint of a late stage, and even within that stage, autonomy in the radical sense is an intellectual construct with an uncertain relationship to institutional practices. The sophistic movement, which elaborated the distinction between *nomos* and *physis* and produced (among other things) the most genuine formulations of the idea of autonomy, was too heterogeneous and its political stance too ambiguous for it to be regarded as the embodiment of a project; moreover, the sources in question are so fragmentary that a question-mark must always hang over the more emphatic interpretations – even

more so than in the case of the other Axial visions.

On the other hand, it may be possible to combine the two perspectives in a way which allows for mutual corrections as well as openness to further questions. The shared problematic has to do with the relationship between order-building and order-transformative aspects of culture, but this common theme is explored from different angles: Castoriadis links a reflexive turn in order-building to a radical questioning of order, up to and including its ontological background, whereas Eisenstadt derives the more critical and constructive attitude to mundane order from guidelines grounded in more sublime models of ultimate order. For the purposes of comparative analysis, it seems legitimate to stress the convergent theorizing of two sides to the cultural constitution of the social world and the possibility of varying relationships between them, rather than to insist on a choice between the two approaches (more concrete comparisons are, in any cases, needed to test their relative strengths). At the same time, a flexible synthesis of insights from both sources may help to highlight a common shortcoming. As we have seen, neither Castoriadis nor Eisenstadt can be accused of cultural determinism. In both cases, the interplay of cultural patterns and power structures is acknowledged in principle; there is, however, no denying that the dynamics and transformations of power are relatively under-theorized in comparison with the cultural side. This is most evident in regard to the question of state formation. Eisenstadt deals with the early state from a comparative angle and with reference to the more radical changes brought about by the Axial turn, but he is mainly interested in the structural position and cultural profile of elites involved in state-building. Castoriadis contrasts the self-governing *polis* with conventional notions of the state, but does not raise the question whether it might have been the outcome of anomalous and self-limiting paths to state formation. In both cases, then, state formation as a structured process is largely left out of account, and a closer look at this issue will raise more general questions about power and its part in historical breakthroughs.

Although our argument will thus move beyond the ideas developed by Castoriadis and Eisenstadt, it will do so in accord with a more fundamental assumption shared by both authors. They are not cultural determinists, but *cultural indeterminacy* is crucial to their interpretations of history in general and the Greek experience in particular. Both the invention of autonomy and the Axial transformation are grounded in creative cultural projects which transcend the level of structural constraints, even if the concrete meaning and outcome of the transformative visions depends on complex processes of interaction with factors and forces involved in the reproduction of social life. The overall frame of reference for historical inquiry is thus centred on an interplay of more or less enabling conditions and more or less innovative orientations, and the corresponding methodological model is an ongoing synthesis of explanation and interpretation. No historical explanation is complete, but an open-ended survey of interconnected factors at work helps to clarify the context of interpretive patterns which open up new horizons of their own; conversely, the effort to grasp emergent constellations of meaning (imaginary significations, in Castoriadis' terms) and

their intrinsic logic puts the tasks as well as the limits of explanation into perspective. This brief indication of direction may make more sense if we relate it to specific features of the Greek experience and consider some aspects which have – from one angle or another – been singled out as fundamental structural determinants, before going on to analyze key development from a more culture-centred point of view.

The claim that the *polis* was first and last an autonomous peasant community draws on traditional views and has found support among modern analysts of otherwise different persuasions. This is the line taken by Marx when he refers to "the city as an already existing site of the rural population",<sup>14</sup> and revived in a recent unorthodox Marxist account of the egalitarian "regime of the peasant citizen"<sup>15</sup> (opposed to the more official Marxist conception of slavery as the basis of Greek society). Despite the very different background assumptions, the same approach is evident in Victor Hanson's definition of the *polis* as an "exclusive and yet egalitarian community of farmers", and his description of a "broad-based agricultural timocracy" as a precondition of further shifts towards democracy.<sup>16</sup> In general, such interpretations tend to see Athenian-style democracy as a structural possibility inherent in the peasant-citizen community, and all the more probable because of the strict limits imposed on aristocratic aspirations from the outset. There are, however, good reasons to question this image of the *polis*: it does not do justice to the political and cultural innovations which opened up a wide range of possible variants. Rather than a firmly structured community of agrarian equals, the early *polis* was a new context within which aristocratic and egalitarian trends could interact, compete and combine in unique and productive ways; on both sides, the shared lifeworld of the *polis* was reflected in distinctive characteristics.<sup>17</sup> This view is further supported by the fact that *poleis* where – as a result of conquest – the citizen community exploited a dependent agrarian population could still undergo significant political changes, in some ways similar to those which elsewhere paved the way for democracy (Sparta is the obvious case in point). In short, there is no denying that the unprecedented diffusion of power institutionalized in the early *polis* favoured peasant freedom, but the fusion of peasant and citizen was an achievement of forces released by the *polis* and aided by a contingent course of events, rather than a constitutive feature of the *polis* as such. The *polis* pattern could also be adapted to more or less radical strategies of exclusion. The most momentous steps towards inclusion of the peasantry (the early and late sixth-century reforms in Athens) were the outcome of a very specific local history; and the subsequent rise of radical democracy was linked to an abrupt empowerment of unpropertied urban strata, rather than the peasantry.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth 1973) 474.

<sup>15</sup> Ellen M. Wood, *Peasant-Citizen and Slave: The Foundations of Athenian Democracy* (London 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Victor D. Hanson, *The Other Greeks* (New York 1995) 3, 213.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Morris has defended this view in several recent works; cf. especially "The strong principle of equality and the archaic origins of Greek democracy" in J. Ober and Ch. Hedrick (eds.), *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern* (Princeton 1996) 19–48.

The agrarian foundations of the *polis* had more to do with a basic problem, solved in different ways, than with any given structures. It has never been in dispute that ownership and control of land were central to the conflicts and institution-building efforts of the early *polis*; but recent research seems to highlight the diversity of inventive responses. Agrarian relations could be regulated in a manner more or less conducive to further political gains by the peasantry, and a variety of regimes proved stable enough to survive from archaic into classical times, although there was no crisis-proof solution to the problem (the Spartan alternative, often seen as such a model from antiquity onwards, seems in fact to have been less stable than some others). Neither radical redistribution nor total communal appropriation could be considered as practical strategies, even if visions of such possibilities grew out of the struggle. The emerging *polis* was characterized by an unequal but contestable distribution of social power in general and landed property in particular, and the most typical conflicts between aristocrats and smallholders seem to have centred on unequal access to formally undistributed communal land.<sup>18</sup>

The second interpretive model to be mentioned here is no longer defended by scholars, but it was of major importance in the history of modern approaches to the classical world, and current views have to a significant extent developed in opposition to it; a brief glance at its basic assumptions may be useful. The main claim in question is that the key to the history of the *polis* is to be found in economic changes, more particularly in commercial growth and the emergence of a monetary economy. Eduard Meyer's comparison of the archaic and the classical *polis* with late medieval and early modern Europe exemplifies this point of view.<sup>19</sup> Three kinds of criticism have, however, led historians to dismiss it as an over-modernizing interpretation. The impact of commerce, manufacture and monetarization on the Greek economy was, on closer examination, found to have been much more limited than the modernists liked to assume. Such changes as did occur were contained within a framework which maintained the primacy of politics and thus imposed specific limits on the role of economic logic in social life. Finally, Greek ways of understanding and conceptualizing work, trade and wealth cannot be equated with modern ones: there were no unifying ideological constructs or value-orientations of the kind that are involved in the apparent separation of economy from society.<sup>20</sup> These criticisms can now be taken for granted, but they do not exhaust the problem. As the debate on Polanyi's distinction between embedded and disembedded economies and its application to ancient Greece has shown, stark contrasts between ancient and modern worlds can be misleading, and we must allow for significant shifts within the period that concerns us here; it has even been suggested that a "great transformation" was in the making in the fifth century and had something to do with the rise of democra-

<sup>18</sup> The above summary draws on Stefan Link, *Landverteilung und sozialer Frieden im archaischen Griechenland* (Stuttgart 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Eduard Meyer, *Kleine Schriften I* (Halle 1924) 99–135.

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion in M.M. Austin and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Economic and Social History of Ancient Greece: An Introduction* (London 1977) 3–18.

cy, but took a turn that can only be understood in the light of the institutional context.<sup>21</sup> The cultural and political containment of the economy should, in other words, be seen as an ongoing active response to changes, rather than a permanent blockage, and this would allow for a critical dialogue with the modernists. This dynamic character of the *polis* framework is, moreover, reflected in the diverse patterns of "embeddedness" that took shape in the course of the transition from Archaic to Classical times. Different versions of the *polis* gave rise to correspondingly different ways of accommodating, circumscribing or marginalizing a more commercial and monetarized economy. The Spartan strategy of systematic marginalization of economic activity was – like other aspects of the Spartan model – conducive to side-effects which in the long run undermined the regime. The Athenian line of development led to a more complex interaction of economy and society, but also to a variety of arrangements which served to mute and minimize the disruptive effects of new economic practices; they include the concentration of commercial activity in the hands of resident foreigners and – as economic historians have more recently underlined – the fourth-century development of an "invisible" (i.e. culturally and socially semi-excluded) financial sector which was to a disproportionate extent managed by women and slaves. Yet another constellation emerged in Corinth, where a land-based oligarchy took advantage of unusual commercial wealth to consolidate its power and stabilize the mechanisms of exclusion. The traditional image of Corinth as a mercantile state, anomalous in the Greek context, has not withstood criticism, but the opening to commerce did set it apart from most other *poleis*. There is, however, the debatable but perhaps more extreme case of sixth-century Phocaea, noted by Austin and Vidal-Naquet: here a civic model may have been adapted to commercial and maritime goals.<sup>22</sup>

The third approach has a much more problematic status in the field of classical studies: it is grounded in modern thought and experience and reflects an enduring temptation to extrapolate into the past, but despite some *prima facie* suggestive facts it faces, particular obstacles when applied to Greek history. Its main claim is that socio-economic conflicts, more or less clearly defined as class struggles, should be central to an interpretive history of the *polis*. Two noteworthy recent works in this vein may be seen as the most serious attempts to theorize a view which otherwise tends to lapse into ideological shortcuts. G.M. de Ste. Croix's class analysis of the Greek world (from Archaic times to late antiquity) relies on Marxian categories; Michael Mann's account of Greece as a "centralized multi-power-actor civilization" rejects the Marxian framework as too narrow, but accepts that political class struggle was one of the most distinctive and decisive Greek innovations.<sup>23</sup> In the former case, the main emphasis is on land and unfree labour as the key factors of production; those who enjoyed privileged access to both were also in a position to maximize their part in the

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ian Morris, "The Athenian economy twenty years after *The Ancient Economy*", *Classical Philology* 89 (1994) 351–66.

<sup>22</sup> Austin and Vidal-Naquet (*supra* n.20) 68.

<sup>23</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London 1981); Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power I* (Cambridge 1986) 190–230.

collective exploitation of subordinate groups by the citizen elite. By excluding the basis-superstructure model from the discussion, Ste. Croix avoids the issue of political determinants of the class structure. From his perspective, the whole history of the pre-Hellenistic *polis* appears as a deviation from the more polarized pattern which prevailed at the beginning as well as during the millennium between the Macedonian conquest and the rise of Islam: the class struggle within the *polis* was essentially a matter of the poorer citizens resisting further downgrading and demanding some share in the surplus extracted from unfree labour, and Greek democracy was merely the most spectacular episode of this protracted but ultimately futile resistance to history. At this point, the basis-superstructure model returns with a vengeance. As Ste. Croix sees it, the underlying economic factors reasserted themselves and destroyed democracy from the fourth century onwards. But a model that can only treat four exceptionally creative centuries as a foredoomed deviation from fundamental norms must be regarded as a caricatural version of historical materialism.

Mann therefore proposes to redefine the notion of the class struggle in more pluralistic terms. The *polis* presupposes a particular constellation of economic, political, military and ideological power; more specifically, the citizens' capacity for collective and conflictual action reflects the structural autonomy of the political and military power that they shared. In describing the conflicts that took place within this framework as class struggle, Mann is contradicting his own definition of class as a purely economic category. But his thesis is also open to more serious empirical objections. The most detailed historical research on intra-*polis* conflicts does not suggest that they were typically or predominantly centred on the socio-economic issues which must be involved if the concept of class is to have any specific content.<sup>24</sup> Land and credit were among the issues of internal conflict in Archaic and Classical Greece (in some cases, such as the crisis which led to Solon's reforms in Athens, their interconnection seems to have been crucial), and they became much more important as the general crisis of the *polis* progressed from the fourth century onwards, but during the period with which we are now concerned, they do not stand out as uniformly decisive factors. Acute and destructive conflicts could develop for other reasons, and measures which might seem to have a socio-economic thrust – e.g. the confiscation of property or the manumission of slaves – were in fact taken for political purposes. Given the broad spectrum of more or less participatory regimes, minor differences over the constitutional order – and therefore the access to political power – could result in factional struggles which were then aggravated by other factors, such as traditional cleavages within the elite and ties to the stronger *poleis* which aspired to hegemony. On the other hand, violent internal conflict was by no means a uniform and regular feature of the *polis*: the strong collective identity linked to the political order was often effective against the threat of *stasis*. In short, the

<sup>24</sup> H.J. Gehrke, *Stasis: Untersuchungen zu den inneren Kriegen in den griechischen Staaten des 5. und 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* (München 1985). On developments after the 4th century, cf. A. Fuks, *Social Conflict in Ancient Greece* (Leiden 1984).

emphasis on social conflict – more or less broadly defined – as a key to the *polis* and its history seems misplaced; the focus should rather be on the *polis* as a framework within which conflicts could unfold more openly than in earlier or contemporary societies, but which could also channel the potential for conflict in different directions and generate counterweights which made it remarkably resistant to breakdown.

Finally, the idea of the *polis* as essentially a warrior community has a long history and may still be more widely accepted than the views criticized above. Karl Marx's reference to war as the most important kind of collective work in the ancient world and Max Weber's description of the ancient city as a warrior-guild are classic examples. More recently, Jean-Pierre Vernant has forcefully defended this point of view: he stresses the omnipresence of inter-*polis* warfare, the identity of warrior and citizen, and the reflection of this state of things in a world-view which maximizes the role of conflict.<sup>25</sup> Significant objections to the established view are perhaps less conclusive than in the above cases, but some key points can be summarized. Most importantly, the role of military factors in the rise of the *polis* is now treated in a more nuanced way: the notion of the "hoplite revolution", in the sense of an abrupt change in military tactics (the turn to armoured infantry) leading to a major redistribution of social and political power, has been laid to rest. The change in military tactics and organization was a more long-drawn-out process than earlier accounts suggested; the hoplite phalanx itself was the outcome of complex developments, including political and cultural choices, rather than a purely strategic innovation; the mobilization of peasants for war interacted with other factors in the formation of the *polis*. The socio-cultural context is also reflected in the very comprehensive ritual regulation of archaic warfare, which seems to have done something to limit the damage done to structures and resources of the *polis*. And although it remains true that frequent inter-*polis* warfare was compatible with the cultural unity of the Greek world, the idea of a natural and universal state of war is misleading: significant parts of the Greek world enjoyed significant periods of peace. Finally, the fifth century saw new developments which changed the whole relationship between *polis* and war. The conflict with the Persian Empire, followed by an unprecedented polarization of the struggle for hegemony, had momentous consequences for the major protagonists as well as for the whole *polis* system: wars were now fought on a larger scale, became more disruptive of traditional rules, and put more strain on the social fabric of the *polis*. In the short run, this higher level of militarization aided a unique breakthrough to democracy in the most powerful and innovative *polis*,

<sup>25</sup> J.-P. Vernant, "Introduction" in J.-P. Vernant (ed.), *Problèmes de la guerre en Grèce ancienne* (Paris 1968) 9–30. For a very extreme version of the primacy of war, cf. Paul Rahe, *Republics: Ancient and Modern* (Chapel Hill 1992). As for critical reconsiderations, the following papers seem particularly important: Paul Cartledge, "Hoplites and heroes: Sparta's contribution to the technique of ancient warfare", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 97 (1977) 11–27; W.R. Connor, "Early Greek land warfare as symbolic expression", *Past and Present* 119 (1988) 3–29; Christian Meier, "Die Rolle des Krieges im klassischen Athen", *Historische Zeitschrift* 251.3 (1990) 555–606.

but in the longer run and with regard to the Greek world as a whole, it played a major role in precipitating a general crisis.

Historical reinterpretation of the role of war in Greek civilization thus seems to be leading to the same conclusion as in the other cases we have considered: the context of the *polis* is crucial, and the seemingly self-contained factors have to be analyzed in that light. Moreover, the *polis* is not simply a structural framework, but a constellation of institutional patterns and cultural horizons, within which the supposedly more material forces – those related to the production of wealth as well as the pursuit of power – are defined and oriented in specific ways. This view of the *polis* confirms and concretizes a shared premise of the two theoretical approaches discussed above: as we have seen, they focus on institutional contexts and channels of social creativity. On this basis, the following discussion will deal with various aspects of the Greek experience – more or less directly related to the central role of the *polis* – and consider them in the light of questions posed by Castoriadis and Eisenstadt. This confrontation will highlight differences as well as affinities between the two lines of argument, and draw on insights due to both sides while moving towards a more complex comparative framework. To begin with, some distinctive features of the Greek relationship to historical predecessors (1) and surviving older civilizations (2) must be noted. The next – and most crucial – part of our argument has to do with the formation and fundamental characteristics of the *polis* (3); this institutional core of the Greek world took shape in connection with a redrawing of geopolitical boundaries (4). The transformative potential of the *polis* must be analyzed with particular reference to contrasting patterns of power, tyranny (5) and democracy (6). Finally, we will reconsider the cultural dimension of the breakthrough, with regard to the enduring dominance of *polis* religion (7) as well as the rise of philosophy (8). At that point, some tentative conclusions about the merits, shortcomings and necessary revisions of the two models may be suggested.

### The intercivilizational context

1. The breakthrough that began in Archaic Greece was preceded by a civilizational collapse of – as far as we can judge – quite exceptional dimensions: the demise of Mycenaean Greece. Growing knowledge of the Mycenaean world has highlighted the differences between its core structures and those of the *polis*, but the results are fragmentary enough for the character and degree of the contrast to remain a matter of debate, and to enable a minority of historians to speculate on basic continuities across the divide. Although it seems obvious that the Mycenaean kingdoms were in fundamental respects closer to Near Eastern political models than the Archaic Greek *polis* ever was, no clear picture of the relationship between monarchy, aristocracy, bureaucracy and priesthood has emerged. On the other hand, the Mycenaean world was marked by an intercivilizational encounter which had no contemporary parallel in the Near East; Minoan influences transformed the religious traditions of the Indo-European invaders and gave rise to a



religious syncretism whose legacy survived the economic and political collapse at the end of the Bronze Age. The Cretan source remained important for Archaic and Classical Greek religion, however elusive the specific connections may be. A plausible case has been made for Cretan origins (at least in part) of currents marginal to the religious culture of the *polis*, such as the cult of Dionysos and the less easily definable Orphic tradition; but this genuine continuity seems to have been accompanied by more arbitrary references to Crete alongside other symbolic sites of religious alterity.<sup>26</sup>

As for the crisis at the end of the Bronze Age, it remains – as Pierre Lévêque puts it – “an enigmatic catastrophe”: its disappearance from collective memory is no less striking than its destructive impact, and even the most plausible conjectures can only claim partial success. A sudden and simultaneous collapse of political centres was followed by a more long-drawn-out cultural decline. The whole process was obviously linked to a more general crisis of states and civilizations in the Near East, but the traditional idea of a mass invasion (by the “sea-peoples”) is now being abandoned in favour of factors more internal to the region. One hypothesis, based on careful examination of the evidence, is worth noting because of its implications for comparative research: the crisis may have been triggered by changes in military technology which enhanced the role of infantry at the expense of war chariots, typical of Late Bronze Age warfare, and at the same time made it more difficult for the power centres to control marginal or rebellious areas.<sup>27</sup> On this view, the structural problems and tensions of state formation were more central to the regressive process than any external disturbances. But the particularly destructive turn of events in Mycenaean Greece may also be due to specific features which aggravated the general crisis. There are good reasons to believe that the exploitative and potentially self-destructive dynamic of a palace-centred economy (the “palatial mode of production”, as M. Liverani calls it) became more pronounced in marginal societies which tried to imitate the main regional centres but could not muster the same range of resources. In this context, institutional shortcomings of Mycenaean monarchy may have made the whole system more vulnerable: the Near Eastern model of royal authority and bureaucratic control seems to have been grafted onto a much more limited image of kingship, rooted in Indo-European traditions.<sup>28</sup>

For our purposes, however, the specifics of the collapse are less important than the symbolic reappropriation of the Mycenaean past in the very different setting of archaic Greece. A new dimension was thus added to the religious legacy which had survived a long phase of regression: the vanished world was recreated as a heroic age and an intermediary domain between the human and divine realms. This was part of a broader restructuring of relationships between the emerging *polis* and the sacred, but also a key aspect of the background to later

<sup>26</sup> For interesting speculations on the Cretan background, cf. P. Lévêque, *Introduction aux premières religions* (Paris 1997) 181–95.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. R. Drews, *The End of the Bronze Age* (Princeton 1993).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. P. Carlier, “La royauté mycénienne” in C. Nicolet (ed.), *Du pouvoir dans l'Antiquité: mots et réalités* (Geneve 1990) 37–52.

cultural developments. In particular, the mytho-historical framework inherited from archaic times remained in place and provided signposts for rationalizing approaches to the past. Even the most critical trend in Greek historiography, exemplified by Thucydides, took a downsized version of the traditional picture for granted.<sup>29</sup>

The historical constellation has some bearing on the theoretical issues outlined at the beginning of the paper. Castoriadis bases his interpretation of ancient Greece on a sharp distinction between heteronomy and autonomy; the dichotomy may have to be qualified if we want to grasp the peculiar characteristics of a society which survived the collapse of a whole cultural and political order but did not embark on the construction of a new one until some three centuries later. As we shall see, this is only the first step towards a more nuanced view of the historical movement towards autonomy. The transformation of an under-structured society into an actively self-structuring one was a complex process with inbuilt checks and barriers; the imaginary reembedding in the past must be seen as one of the counterweights to the project or potential of autonomy. On the other hand, the doubts thus raised about Castoriadis' approach do not *ipso facto* strengthen the other model mentioned above. The Greek experience of collapse, innovation and reappropriation differs markedly from the other Axial cultures. China is the most obvious counter-example: the takeover of the Shang state by the Zhou dynasty at the end of the second millennium BC was roughly contemporaneous with the crisis in the Near East, but it did not mark the same kind of civilizational setback. Rather, the modified cultural and political innovations of the new rulers reinforced the basic continuity of Chinese civilization and established a pattern which later served to articulate the Axial turn in more traditionalist terms than elsewhere. As for Israel, the background to its version of the Axial breakthrough was a local rupture within a regional context of far-reaching but not terminal decline. The tribes which went on to create the Israelite state were newcomers (their exact identity is a matter of debate) on the margin of a civilizational area whose main centres had survived but temporarily lost much of their strength; the Israeli experience was, in other words, marked by direct confrontation with a whole cluster of older cultures and a growing threat from their resurgent power. India might seem comparable to Greece in that its Axial transformation also came after a civilizational collapse and a new beginning. The collapse was, however, more distant in time and the vanished world much less important to the successor culture. Subterranean connections between the Indus civilization and later Indian religions are and will remain a matter of debate; but there was, in any case, no explicit incorporation of an extinct and transfigured civilization into the imaginary of a later one.

2. The mythical image of the Mycenaean past took shape at a time when the Greek world was being transformed by a more material intercivilizational encounter. Recent research has thrown new light on the relationship between

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Oswyn Murray, "La Grecia degli "eroi": mito, storia, archeologia" in S. Settis (ed.), *I Greci*, vol. 2, 1: *Formazione* (Torino 1996) 173–88.

Archaic Greece and the Near East; as Oswyn Murray and Walter Burkert have argued, it was not only Greek art, but the whole of Greek culture that took an "Orientalizing" turn during the eighth and the first half of the seventh century, and this phase coincided with the emergence of the *polis*.<sup>30</sup> The early Archaic period thus saw a sudden intensification and diversification of cultural contacts that had never been interrupted. It seems appropriate to speak of a multi-civilizational area, extending from Mesopotamia to the Aegean and further west (as a result of Greek and Phoenician expansion). Within this region, the main current of cultural diffusion was from east to west (but not exclusively: Greek influence on indigenous states and peoples in Asia Minor can be seen as an early and limited step towards Hellenization). The emerging Greek periphery borrowed and assimilated a wide range of techniques and inventions of Near Eastern origin – from manual craft skills to techniques of divination and from the alphabet to models of mythological thought.

But the distinction between Near Eastern core and Aegean periphery does not take us very far. The Orientalizing turn cannot be described as an indiscriminate opening to more advanced cultures; rather, the Archaic Greek relationship to Oriental centres and sources was markedly diversified from the very outset. Patterns of interaction varied from case to case, and the level of awareness did not always reflect the degree of indebtedness. The fundamental role of Mesopotamia as a source of cultural models of the most diverse kind was overshadowed by more visible intermediaries (it is hard to tell how much direct contact the Greeks had with the most expansionist offshoot of Mesopotamian civilization, the Assyrian empire), and Mesopotamian inputs were not clearly distinguished from the heritage of Bronze Age Anatolia and Syria. By contrast, Egyptian influence on Archaic Greece came later and was more limited, but the high visibility of this very different culture made it a prime target of self-reflection in an exotic mode. For the Greeks, Egypt became both a privileged counter-example to their own culture and a particularly authoritative source for those who sought alien origins of Greek traditions.<sup>31</sup> But apart from those two major civilizational centres, two other connections were of crucial importance to the course of Greek history.<sup>32</sup> On

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece* (London 1993) 81–101; Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge, MA) 1992. The formerly influential – but never uncontested – interpretation of Greek history in terms of purely or predominantly internal growth has been laid to rest, but that does not mean there is no room for controversy; some scholars in the field go well beyond the new consensus (a good example is S.P. Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art* (Princeton 1992); but it should be noted that even for this author, "it remains remarkable how different from its Eastern neighbours the Greek mind was" [xxii]). The well-known ideological excrescences of the debate may be more relevant to the diagnosis of our times than to the understanding of Greek history.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. F. Hartog, "Les Grecs égyptologues", *Annales ESC* 41:4 (1986) 953–68. Greek interest in Egypt was, among other things, strengthened by an episode of more significant military involvement than anywhere else in the Near East before the Macedonian conquest: Greek mercenaries seem to have played a decisive role in the last (seventh-century) restoration of the Egyptian state.

<sup>32</sup> For a seminal discussion of the two cases, cf. Santo Mazzarino, *Fra Oriente e Occidente* (Firenze 1947).

the one hand, the close contact between Greek and non-Greek communities in Asia Minor gave rise to a multi-ethnic network with shared cultural horizons and shifting internal boundaries. In particular, the Lydian kingdom "became a part of the Greek world as no other foreign kingdom or people ever did",<sup>33</sup> seen from the Greek side, its identity was ambiguous, but the ambiguity served to throw Greek problems into relief: although Lydia was the prototype of an Eastern monarchy in search of Greek cultural credentials, it remained alien enough to stand out as a paradigm for tyranny (and therefore as an anti-model to the *polis*), and Herodotus's account of its downfall casts it in the role of an aspiring oriental empire-builder who self-destructed by bringing a much stronger rival into the arena. On the other hand, a less symbiotic but more productive relationship linked the Phoenician city-states to the Greek islands (and through them to the mainland). Among the Near Eastern neighbours of Archaic Greece, the Phoenicians were the only ones to combine the transmission of essential techniques (most notably the alphabet) with competition in some of the fields central to Greek development (trade and expansion into the Western Mediterranean). In view of the importance of this connection, the Greek image of the Phoenicians might seem surprisingly faint in comparison with accounts of other peoples encountered in the same context: they appear to have been perceived as inventors, practitioners and propagators of transferable skills, rather than as a separate culture with a distinctive identity. But this may to some extent reflect an underdeveloped sense of collective identity on the part of the Phoenicians themselves.<sup>34</sup>

In short, the eight-century transformation of the Greek world was in many ways linked to a reaffiliation with the Oriental background, rather than a separation from it. But the obverse of this process is no less important: the Greek way of relating to the older cultures of the Near East combined autonomy and receptivity in a very unusual fashion. Here the analysis must start with favourable geopolitical conditions. As Christian Meier puts it, the Greeks enjoyed an optimal combination of cultural proximity and political distance; at a decisive historical juncture, they had access to superior cultural resources without any threat from a stronger power. No other part of the periphery of the Near East was ever in a comparable position. It was, however, the Greek response to this conjuncture that led to more lasting achievements. The transmission of the alphabet is perhaps the best example of a reflexive and creative learning process: a new cultural technique was adopted together with the corresponding teaching techniques, and at the same time perfected in such a fundamental way that some historians prefer to speak of invention and reserve the term "alphabet" for Greek writing (on the grounds that it was "the first writing that informed the reader what the words sounded like, whether or not he knew what the words meant"<sup>35</sup>).

<sup>33</sup> P. Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience* (Baltimore 1994) 23.

<sup>34</sup> S. Moscati, "Introduction" in V. Krings (ed.), *La Civilisation phénicienne et punique - Manuel de recherche* (Leiden 1995) 2.

<sup>35</sup> B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge 1991) 3.

But the Archaic Greeks did not merely improve on models borrowed from older cultures. More importantly, they combined extensive borrowing of ideas, skills and techniques with the elaboration of original socio-cultural frameworks. To put it another way, *civilizing processes* – changes designed to enrich and rationalize social life – were based on borrowed models, but overall *civilizational patterns* which emerged in conjunction with these changes took a more distinctive form. The key case in point (to be discussed at greater length below) is the invention of the *polis*. Although the evidence is much less conclusive than for the alphabet, it seems very likely that the example of Phoenician city-states had something to do with the political reorganization of Greek society at the beginning of the Archaic Age, but if there was a model, it was transformed in a more creative and momentous way than any of the accompanying cultural techniques. The *polis* emerged as a counter-model of the city-state, rather than one type among others: it was less dependent on an urban centre, more capable of integrating its rural population on equal terms, and more resistant to the separation of state power from society than the Near Eastern prototypes ever seem to have been. The sources are admittedly so fragmentary that no precise account can be given of the differences between the Phoenician city-state and the early Greek *polis*. But there is nothing to suggest (and the whole context makes it extremely unlikely) that there was any Phoenician counterpart to the political integration of the peasantry and the fusion of the state with the citizen community; developments in Archaic Greece were already marked by both these trends, albeit not without obstacles and significant exceptions.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Sweeping claims about Phoenician primacy are often made by those who reject the supposedly Eurocentric idea of "Greek uniqueness". But no good reasons have so far been given for believing that the very idea of the *polis* was brought to Greece by the Phoenicians. It seems clear that monarchic rule in the Phoenician city-states was subject to more effective structural and institutional limitations than in the core states of the Near East, but there is only one known case of a monarchy being abolished (in sixth-century Tyros); this was a brief interlude, and the city was under Babylonian domination. The persistence of monarchy (together with a corresponding type of religion) is obviously linked to other kinds of continuity with Near Eastern patterns: the Phoenician city-states had survived the crisis at the end of the Bronze Age without a civilizational regression of the kind that occurred in the Greek world, and their commercial and maritime expansion from the ninth century onwards was closely linked to the resurgence of an imperial power whose sovereignty they accepted (cf. S. Frankenstein, "The Phoenicians in the Far West: A function of Neo-Assyrian Imperialism" in M.T. Larsen (ed) *Power and Propaganda: A Symposium on Ancient Empires* (Copenhagen 1979) 263–294. But there is another side to this comparison. Precisely because of the strict limits of innovation in the Phoenician homeland, developments in overseas colonies could differ more markedly from the original pattern than they did in the Greek case. The trajectory of the Carthaginian state was so distinctive that some authors prefer to speak of a Punic civilization, affiliated but not identical with the Phoenician one (for recent discussions, cf. W. Ameling, "Das Problem des karthaginischen Staates", *Historische Zeitschrift* 257:1 (1993) 109–31, and M.H. Fantar, *Carthage: Approche d'une Civilisation* 1–2 (Tunis 1993)). Carthaginian social structures became in some ways more similar to Greek ones; in particular, it now seems clear that Carthaginian power was built on a more important agricultural basis and had more to do with citizen armies that historians tended to think. The result was a power structure which may have mixed some elements of the democratic *polis* with a more pronounced oligarchic component: the Carthaginian empire served to satisfy

Similarly, the borrowing of rituals, mythological motifs and narrative patterns from Oriental traditions served to enrich and structure Archaic Greek religion, but the imported elements were grafted onto a religious imaginary which differed from Near Eastern patterns in far-reaching ways. Oswyn Murray notes one particularly striking aspect of this uniquely Greek background: the creation of "genealogies deriving abstract political concepts from the gods ... has no parallel in the east and heralds a new stage in civic consciousness".<sup>37</sup> This adaptation of divine origins to human concerns reflects a more general attitude. There is no doubt that Archaic Greek religion was already – in comparison with its eastern contemporaries – characterized by a marked emphasis on human autonomy vis-à-vis the divine realm; that applies to the underlying world-view articulated through myths rather than ritual, but also to the active and sovereign involvement of the political community in the conduct of religious affairs, and to the exceptional role of a cultural genre unconstrained by any sacred authority – epic poetry – in the development of the religious imagination. In short, distinctive and interrelated patterns of political and religious life constituted a civilizational nucleus which matured in the course of interaction with more developed regions.

The Greek relationship to the Near East has no parallel in other Axial cultures. The Jewish monarchy and its successor states were much closer to the core of the region and modeled on its traditional power structures; the religious countercurrent which culminated in the Axial turn was an expression of protest against imperial tyranny as well as the cult of power spreading in its wake.<sup>38</sup> In the other two cases, intercivilizational encounters were much less important. India was in contact with the Near East during the Axial phase; in particular, the western border regions were conquered by the Achaemenid empire, and this led to the adoption of syllabic writing, but there is no evidence of Near Eastern influence on religious and political developments within India. As for Indian relations with the Hellenistic world, they belong to the aftermath of the Axial age. Finally, the most self-contained transformation took place in China; there was, of course, no complete isolation from other parts of Eurasia, but it seems clear that developments during the Axial centuries were not affected in any major way by inputs from other civilizational area. In brief, the available evidence suggests that only two of the Axial centres had a "significant other", and in both cases, it was the core region of the Near East, but the ways of relating to it were – as we have seen – very different.

We should now briefly consider the theoretical implications of both sides of the context: the reinvented past and the rediscovered East. If we can – as suggested above – take the question of the order-building and order-transforming capacities of culture as a common denominator for otherwise different problema-

some demands of the *demos* (Ameling 131), but the oligarchy remained in control. Cultural Hellenization – evident but not uncontested from the fifth-century onwards – can perhaps be seen as a sequel to structural assimilation.

<sup>37</sup> Murray (*supra* n. 30) 92.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. M. Weinfeld, "The protest against imperialism in Ancient Israelite prophecy" in S.N. Eisenstadt (*supra* n. 9) 169–82.

tics, some tentative conclusions may be drawn. The Archaic period in Greece began with a rapid transformation of a culturally impoverished and politically unstructured society into a new and notably original civilizational complex; on the other hand, the order built during the formative phase was marked by a high level of inbuilt and long-term transformative capacity, although this potential was channeled in specific directions. It is hardly necessary to argue the point that new and broader cultural horizons enhanced the innovative ability of the emerging *polis*: both the reawakened interest in the past and the reactivated opening to the Orient opened up new perspectives for socio-cultural construction, although not in the same ways. The Near Eastern connection served to widen the range of cultural resources, whereas the Mycenaean one added a new dimension to the collective imaginary (basic elements of a religious tradition had survived the Dark Ages, but the construction of a heroic age opened up new possibilities of interconnection between the human and the divine realms).

The intercivilizational context was, in short, favourable to a pioneering project of order-building. To what extent we can analyze this constellation in terms of the two abovementioned theoretical models is another question. A broadening of horizons that led to independent and original development can surely be seen as a step towards autonomy; on the other hand, both the mythical transfiguration of the past and the acceptance of Oriental models in various domains circumscribed the field of free activity. This double-edged situation shows – once again – the need to relativize the contrast between autonomy and heteronomy and redefine both notions in a way that would allow for ambiguities, tensions and transitions. A suitably reformulated version of the Axial model might provide a framework for that purpose. But in the present context, we must begin with aspects and issues so far left unthematized by the theory of the Axial transformation. Briefly, it would seem that encounters with more advanced civilizations – or re-imaginings of past ones – can open up horizons which have some affinity with the Axial condition. It is not being suggested that interaction with more advanced cultures can play the same role as reference to models of transcendental order, but it may – at least in some particularly pronounced cases – represent another way of enhancing social creativity and revealing possibilities of radical innovation. In the case of Archaic Greece, the Orientalizing turn did not – as similar developments seem to have done in some other cases – lead to systematic imitation of core institutions; rather, a remarkably extensive and intensive learning process helped to sustain an equally exceptional commitment to autonomous change. This unusual combination reflects both aspects of the intercivilizational constellation. We can assume that the imaginary reconstitution of the Mycenaean world (as an integral part of the rearticulation of relationships between society and the sacred) served to consolidate an identity which blocked assimilation to Oriental models, and that the dynamism fueled by borrowings from the Near East made it more difficult to stabilize traditional power structures which might otherwise have benefited from stronger links to the past. The very notion of the *polis* can perhaps be seen as a symbolic expression of this twofold background. The most widely accepted etymology suggests that a Mycenaean

term for a political centre was adapted to new conditions; at the same time, this linguistic shift gave voice to a creative reinterpretation of the city-state.

### *Polis and Colonization*

3. We must now move on to consider the institutional context which has already emerged as a background to the innovations of the Archaic period. Recent research has in many ways thrown new light on the early *polis*; the following discussion will take some widely (even if not universally) accepted conclusions for granted. The creation of the *polis* – the first and most momentous phase of a more long-drawn-out political transformation – was the key achievement of the eighth century; it took place on both sides of the Aegean, but only in some parts of mainland Greece (pioneering developments in a few places, such as the island of Euboea, the Ionian cities and Corinth, were obviously linked to privileged contacts with the Near East). The fact that the rise of the *polis* coincides with the Orientalizing turn makes the Greek departure from established norms all the more remarkable: contrary to long-standing views, it now seems clear that monarchy was from the outset incompatible with the institutional framework of the *polis*.<sup>39</sup> This is perhaps the most striking contrast between the Greek world and other Axial cultures, and it is evident from the very beginning of the period in question. In the other cases, monarchy remained the paradigm of political order and the main vehicle of aspirations to a more perfect order (its fragility in the Israelite states stood out against the background of resurgent and expansionist monarchies in the region, but did not lead to any development of alternative political forms). Institutional and ideological limits to monarchic power are of some importance in all political traditions, but such counterweights cannot be equated with the much more radical anti-monarchic turn in Archaic Greece.

The Greek deviation from the monarchic model can be seen as a formal culmination and confirmation of trends at work during the post-Mycenaean interlude: the monarchies of the Late Bronze Age seem to have decomposed into less structured regimes dominated by local elites. Pierre Carlier's distinction between kingship and monarchy may help to clarify the point at issue: on this view, kingship represents a type of authority that tends to translate into monarchy as a power structure, but the former is not absolutely inseparable from the latter.<sup>40</sup> In the case of the early *polis*, kingly authority would seem to have been disconnected from monarchic rule and divided between magistrates whose powers became more and more dependent on election rather than hereditary status. To put it another way (and use a term introduced by Castoriadis), the imaginary signification of kingship tended to fragment after separation from the power

<sup>39</sup> R. Drews, *Basileus: The Evidence for Kingship in Geometric Greece* (New Haven 1983); K. A. Raaflaub, "Homer to Solon: The rise of the polis" in M. H. Hansen (ed.), *The Ancient Greek City State* (Copenhagen 1993) 41–105.

<sup>40</sup> P. Carlier, *La royauté en Grèce avant Alexandre* (Strasbourg 1984).



structure of monarchy and was in due course overshadowed by other cultural definitions of power. As we shall see, a later attempt to rebuild monarchy from within the *polis* failed to reactivate the ideological framework of kingship; on the other hand, visions of kingship remained alive enough to affect collective memories of the Archaic beginnings and to influence the intellectual search for responses to the fourth-century crisis of the *polis*.

The apparent survivals of an older order based on kinship were in fact integral parts of the *polis*, constructed together with and for the purposes of a more overtly artificial whole. This point is now less controversial than most other questions about the early *polis*. Detailed historical research has shown that the supposedly kinship-based institutions – *genos*, *phratría* and *phylē* – did not add up to a coherent pattern; their workings and trajectories reflect the context of the *polis*, in ways specific to each of the three cases in question, and with an admixture of mythological imagination.<sup>41</sup> The logic and language of kinship were used to organize participation in the *polis* as well as to mobilize conflicting forces within its framework and articulate its vision of its own past. But if this analysis refutes earlier accounts of Greek history as a gradual transition from a kinship-based to a political order, it does not *ipso facto* shift the focus towards a conventional state-centred view. The notion of the state as a power structure separate from society is – as has often been pointed out – inapplicable to the *polis*, and the model of state formation through monopolizing processes (developed by Norbert Elias) seems even less appropriate. A solution to the problem can perhaps be found in a suitably adjusted version of Max Weber's conception of the state. As Weber sees it, statehood presupposes not only territorial control (as well as extraction of resources on that basis) and a claim to monopoly over violence, but also a political community, irreducible to other needs, imperatives and frameworks of social life. These aspects can combine in various ways, and the *polis* represents a very unusual pattern. Its development might be described as a self-limiting and at the same time self-embedding process of state formation: a strong identification with the political community (as Kurt Raaflaub points out, it is more appropriate to speak of a "citizen-state" than a city-state) set strict limits to the monopolization of control resources or violence by separate authorities. An ultimate monopoly of political action and power is maintained by the community of citizens, but the progressive (and very uneven) affirmation of this principle entailed the abolition or downgrading of more specific monopolies, be it the privileges of birth and wealth or the prerogatives of magistrates.

The emergence – or at least adumbration – of this new order in eighth-century Greece testifies to a high level of rationality in political life; this is most evident in the constructive refashioning of archaic patterns.<sup>42</sup> But on another level, the whole process presupposes a new and comprehensive cultural definition of the political sphere: an interpretive project which affirms the primacy as well as the problematic character of the political. Four aspects of this constellation may be

<sup>41</sup> Cf. particularly D. Roussel, *Tribu et cité* (Paris 1976).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Oswyn Murray, "Cities of reason" in O. Murray and S. Price, *The Greek City – From Homer to Alexander* (Oxford 1990) 1–25.

distinguished. First, the political sphere is posited as the most central domain of social life, and at the same time segregated from other fields of action and interaction (as Christian Meier has argued, the construction of a political order which diverged from socio-economic structures was one of the most characteristic features of Greek history). But the centrality of politics could be defined in more or less totalizing terms, and the boundaries which set the political arena apart from economic life and the private sphere could be drawn in different ways; to use the example mentioned by Castoriadis in another context, Athens, Corinth and Sparta exemplify – but do not exhaust – the variations possible within the framework of the *polis*. Second, the *polis* was by definition – and in contrast to monarchy – based on a plurality of political subjects, and the limits to inclusion became matters of permanent debate. Third, the *polis* was from the outset marked by conflicting ideologies and cultural orientations. The idea of an early aristocratic *polis* (followed by a hoplite-dominated one) has proved untenable; the aristocracy was too loosely structured, adaptable to changing contexts and exposed to countercurrents for a lasting ascendancy to be possible. Aristocratic visions of the *polis* were always contested by more egalitarian ones.<sup>43</sup> The enduring (and often noted) dominance of aristocratic values in Greek culture is thus only one side of a more complex picture; a balanced account would also have to stress the fluid boundaries and inbuilt mutability of the aristocratic legacy. Finally, the internal problems and conflicts of the *polis* were – as Christian Meier has shown – conducive to new and momentous intellectual developments. Political thought, in the sense of ongoing collective reflection on public affairs, became a socio-cultural force in its own right and to a degree unknown anywhere else at the time.

To sum up, the Archaic beginnings of the Greek breakthrough were – above all else – characterized by an exceptionally radical redefinition and restructuring of the political domain of social life. Moreover, the eight-century innovations released a more long-term transformative dynamic. The cultural forces involved were most directly operative within the political dimension; and if there was a cultural background to the whole process, its importance has to do with preconditions for the autonomous unfolding of political action and imagination, rather than with any subordination of mundane practices to transcendental visions. The imaginary signification of justice – in the broad sense of a just order – was internal and central to the political transformation. But this does not mean that the formation of the early *polis* was guided by visions of the rule of law. Rather, the “full institutionalization of the *polis* as assembly and of the magistracy as part of the *polis* as well as its counterpart, bound by its decisions, were a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of legislation”, and law-giving began with “pragmatic solutions to the tangible problems of an Archaic *polis*”.<sup>44</sup>

4. The crystallization of the early *polis* was closely linked to a massive enlargement of the Greek world. This process, traditionally – but somewhat

<sup>43</sup> On conflicting ideologies, cf. especially I. Morris (*supra* n. 17); on the question of the aristocracy, cf. E. Stein-Hölkeskamp, *Adelskultur und Polisgesellschaft* (Stuttgart 1989).

<sup>44</sup> K. J. Hölkeskamp, “Written law in Archaic Greece” in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 38 (1992) 98, 93.

misleadingly – known as colonization, is now increasingly seen as a case of civilizational expansion, sparked and sustained by a variety of factors whose relative weight is hard to assess.<sup>45</sup> Trade was important, but perhaps more so as a stimulus and facilitator to other forces than as a direct motive for new settlements; population pressure and the need for more land was crucial, even if not as overwhelming as some earlier theories would have it.<sup>46</sup> For our purposes, the most significant thing about the colonizing movement is that it fully established the Greek world as a civilizational area in its own right, and that this geopolitical consolidation had significant effects on internal structures.

There is no doubt that the experience and the specific demands of colonization were of major importance to the formation of the *polis*, even if historians continue to debate the relationship between the old and the new Greek world. The foundation of new settlements gave greater scope to rational construction and inventive institution-building; lessons learnt in this more artificial context could then be applied to the less malleable communities of the homeland. There was, however, no direct correlation between developments at home and diffusion abroad: a few *poleis* seem to have played a quite disproportionate role in the colonizing process; colonies with all attributes of a *polis* were founded by settlers from regions which had not reached that level (e.g. Achaia); and the two *poleis* which in the end overshadowed all others in mainland Greece – Athens and Sparta – were conspicuously inactive in the colonizing movement. The impact of colonization on Greek history had less to do with the dynamics of political interaction between settlements and mother-cities than with the relationship between culture and politics: the enlarged Greek world reproduced – on a much larger scale – the combination of cultural unity and political fragmentation that was already characteristic of its Aegean core.

The cultural integration of a “decentralized multi-power-actor civilization” (Michael Mann) was to a very high degree dependent on a shared religion. Religious sources and activities had been central to the reconstitution of Greek identity from the beginning of the Archaic period, and overseas expansion reinforced this trend. This aspect of the colonizing movement is most evident in the rise of a religious centre of a unique kind: the Delphi oracle. Its unrivaled authority was in part due to practical credentials (information and advice to the organizers of colonizing projects), but the religious institution as such would not have prospered as it did if it had not been particularly effective in providing a mythological frame of reference for the whole colonizing enterprise. The Archaic reactivation and re-institutionalization of the sacred was reflected in Greek attitudes to the broader Mediterranean arena opened up from the mid-eighth

<sup>45</sup> On this approach to colonization, cf. M. Giangiulio, “Avventurieri, mercanti, coloni, mercenari: Mobilità umana e circolazione di risorse nel Mediterraneo arcaico” in Settis (*supra* n. 29) 497–525; R. Osborne, *Greece in the Making, 1200–479 BC* (London 1996) 197–202; R. Osborne, “Early Greek colonization?” in N. Fisher and H. van Wees (eds.), *Archaic Greece: New Approaches and New Evidence* (London 1998) 251–69.

<sup>46</sup> For a strong (and now abandoned) version of the “population explosion” thesis, cf. A. Snodgrass, *Archaic Greece – The Age of Experiment* (London 1980).

century onwards. There was, however, another side to this nexus of religion and colonization. The creation of new communities and the deliberate construction of their institutional frameworks made human action more visibly central to the religious life of the *polis*. The institutionalization of sacred sites, essential to every colonial foundation, is a case in point: "man made the decisions about what was sacred, and in that respect colonization represents... a significant development in Greek religion".<sup>47</sup>

A more autonomous stance in the religious domain went together with an all-round increase in intellectual activity. The very embodiment of religious opening to an enlarged world developed into a multi-functional cultural centre; as Meier has argued, circumstantial evidence suggests that Delphi played a key role in establishing a pan-Hellenic network of reflection and debate on issues of common interest. The new horizons opened up by colonization enhanced the autonomy of political thought, which could now draw on a much wider range of practical experience. But the intellectual and cultural dynamic released by expansion was not a purely internal one: in the course of colonization, the Greeks encountered other cultures and related to them in different ways (it was not uncommon for new settlements to be founded on conquered territory, but as far as we know, permanent subjugation of indigenous peoples was remarkable rare). The Greek ability to differentiate perceptions of cultural otherness – already noted in connection with the Orientalizing turn – grew with widening contacts and became a major stimulus to reflection; some of the alien worlds discovered during the Archaic phase of expansion had a stronger impact than others on the Greek imaginary (and on Greek self-understanding), but the diversity and reflexivity of references to otherness set Greek culture apart from contemporaries and predecessors.<sup>48</sup> Far too much has been made of the so-called stereotype of the "barbarian". It is no doubt true that a tendency to define Greeks and non-Greeks as polar opposites became more pronounced after the Persian wars, but this trend was accompanied by growing interest in the specifics of other cultures.

The Greek experience of colonization has no parallel in the history of the other Axial cultures. In the case of Israel, the religious breakthrough followed a failed attempt to build a state capable of expansion on a modest scale, and the most crucial developments occurred in response to irreversible defeats. And although expansion and conquest did play a more prominent role in the Axial phases of the two major Oriental civilizations, circumstances and outcomes differed from the Greek pattern. As Hermann Kulke has shown, expansion into the Ganges valley and the rise of a new urban-based culture in that region paved the way for the Axial breakthrough in India.<sup>49</sup> But this was a case of straightforward conquest, accompanied by the consolidation of monarchic rule, and without any comparable dynamic of interaction between the newly conquered region and

<sup>47</sup> I. Malkin, *Religion and Colonization in Ancient Greece* (Leiden 1987) 10.

<sup>48</sup> On Greek attitudes to cultural otherness, cf. W. Nippel, "La costruzione dell' altro" in Settis (*supra* n. 29) 165–96.

<sup>49</sup> H. Kulke, "The historical background of India's Axial Age" in S.N. Eisenstadt (*supra* n. 9) 374–92.

the area of early Aryan settlement. As for the corresponding phase of Chinese civilization, expansion into peripheral regions gave rise to a whole state system which in due course became a battlefield for aspirants to imperial power; the struggle between rival centres led to a progressive strengthening and rationalization of monarchic rule within each of the "warring states", and the thinkers who took a critical view of unbridled power sought refuge in idealized visions of sacred kingship, presented as a legacy of a past golden age, but later adapted to the structures of an imperial successor state. Even if the combination of cultural unity with a plurality of political centres between the eighth and the third century BC bears some resemblance to the Greek world, the long-term logic of development was very different.

### From tyranny to democracy

5. The *polis* was not only a new social formation with unprecedented potential for political self-organization, but also a framework for further institutional differentiation. Variants of the *polis* pattern can be analyzed in terms of structural alternatives as well as local trajectories; within the former category, we should first note the incomplete and abortive but far from insignificant revival of monarchy against the polycentric turn taken in the eighth century (this is one of the most conspicuously underdeveloped themes in Castoriadis' account of the *polis*). The phenomenon of tyranny – widespread although by no means universal during the most dynamic phase of the Archaic period – is interesting in its own right and as a background to later developments. As for its relationship to other contemporary trends, no close correlation with the colonizing movement can be established. It is true that tyrannies responded – or proposed to respond – to some of the same problems as the strategies of overseas expansion; colonization enlarged the cultural world within which tyranny could be confronted with other alternatives; and when the new environment lent itself to large-scale projects, overseas tyrannies could go further and last longer than in the homeland. But the rise of tyranny was much more directly linked to internal dynamics of the *polis* than to the changing geopolitical context. This point is, however, easily misunderstood: tyranny has more frequently been interpreted in an over-modernizing vein than most other aspects of Greek history (the tyrants have, among other things, been seen as popular leaders paving the way for a democratic revolution, or as Bonapartist dictators *avant la lettre*, taking advantage of a stalemate in the class struggle); the more recent analyses, developed in opposition to such views, leave some room for controversy, but they seem to converge on a perspective which highlights the multiple paradoxes of Archaic tyranny.

If the *polis* was uniformly marked by intra-aristocratic rivalry as well as conflicts between elites and less privileged citizens, tyranny may be seen as an attempt to link the two fronts in a way that would neutralize both. An extreme form of aristocratic rule (the monopolization of power by an individual at the expense of the group that had shared it) drew on popular support to overcome

elite resistance. This seems at least to have been the typical pattern of tyranny, although the variety of local cases and the later ideological inflation of the concept make it difficult to draw a clear picture. But the project which thus began as a maneuver within the *polis* had more far-reaching implications. The tyrannies of the Archaic period reactivated visions of monarchy within a political regime and culture based on anti-monarchic premises. Although effective measures were not always possible, the most important tyrannies seem to have pursued state-building policies of the kind usually associated with long-term monopolizing processes: they strove to maximize wealth through taxation and military strength through more control over the means of violence. The most ambitious would-be autocrats may even have aimed at a cultural reorientation of *polis* society. Jacob Burckhardt saw the strategies of Corinthian and Athenian tyrants as efforts to legitimize the realm of utility against the dominant values shared – and disputed – by aristocracy and its rivals.<sup>50</sup> But these innovations failed to mature into a coherent model. Tyranny was, in short, neither institutionalized in its own right (the power wielded by tyrants was superimposed on an existing institutional framework), nor capable of creating a new mode of legitimation. The re-emergence of monarchy from within the *polis* fell short of structural and cultural stabilization. This is all the more remarkable since the Greek world was in close contact with cultures which could have provided paradigms of monarchic legitimacy; the political autonomy established at the very height of the Orientalizing epoch was entrenched enough to overcome the challenge.

Archaic tyranny was a recurrent pattern, and can in that sense be regarded as an institution *sui generis*, but it was identified with individual transgression of normal institutional limits. Paradoxically, this interpretive de-institutionalization of a social pattern became the starting-point for an *ex post* cultural re-elaboration of tyranny as an essential counterpart to the self-image of the *polis*. Public works and cultural patronage served at first to support the tyrants' exclusive claim to represent the *polis*, but in the long run, they did more to strengthen the collective identity of a community that defined itself in opposition to erstwhile usurpers. It has been argued that tyranny embodied an image of sovereignty which was in due course transferred to the *polis* as such.<sup>51</sup> But although popular attitudes to tyranny (which could also appear as a model of individual success through superior ability) were ambiguous enough for some explicit and positive parallels to be possible when it came to the self-definition of a community in contest with others, the negative reference seems more important, and it links up with the original rejection of one-man rule. Tyranny was, first and foremost, an antithesis to the *polis*, and as such a negation of *nomos* and *logos*.<sup>52</sup> The reaction against it found expression in alternative images of individual leadership, such as the legislator, the sage and the founder of a new settlement. But more importantly, it

<sup>50</sup> J. Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* I (München 1977) 171–73.

<sup>51</sup> This seems to be the view taken by J. McGlew, *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca 1993); although it should be noted that the author also stresses anti-tyrannical images of individual leadership.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. G. Giorgini, *La città e il tiranno* (Milano 1993) 33.

was the defunct model of tyranny, rather than the really existing versions of oligarchy that became the ideological opposite of democracy. The democratic *polis* renewed the anti-monarchic turn of the archaic *polis* in a more explicit, radical and reflective way.

This was, however, not the end of tyranny's imaginary afterlife. As Kurt Raaflaub has shown, Athenian democratic ideology used the image of tyranny not only to define the enemy par excellence and consolidate the collective identity of a self-governing community, but also – in less straightforward ways – to sensitize the same community to problems and dangers inherent in the unprecedented power which it had come to exercise over a significant part of the Greek world.<sup>53</sup> In that capacity, the reference to tyranny could also serve the purposes of anti-democratic polemics. The notion of *polis tyrannos* emerged in connection with Athens' imperial ascendancy and seems to have been used by hostile observers as well as realistic architects of the new power structure. More importantly, it was inseparable from a new and widespread concern with the whole problematic of power, now increasingly seen as unmanageable within conventional frames of reference. The accumulation, polarization and de-traditionalization of power during the fifth century forced political thought to face new issues; for democratic thought in particular, it was tempting to accept an "explicit causal link between domination and freedom".<sup>54</sup>

The conjunction of radical democracy and unrestrained power will be considered from another angle below. At this point, we should note some implications of the unfolding discourse on tyranny. If Archaic tyranny was "a move on the road to community self-regulation"<sup>55</sup>, its surviving image became an inducement to community self-reflection. The experience of tyranny thus enhanced the rationalizing and transformative dynamic built into the political framework of Greek civilization; in the context of Axial cultures, this aspect is no less uniquely Greek than the original deviation from the monarchic norm.

6. The relationship between general characteristics of the *polis* and particular features of its democratic version has always been controversial: Athenian-style democracy could not be seen as a normal or typical outcome of the process that began with the rise of the *polis*, but the emergence and the distinctive patterns of democracy had to be explained in terms of trends and possibilities built into the institutional framework that prevailed throughout the Archaic and Classical period. The debate on Greek democracy continues to revolve around the question of continuity or discontinuity with the Archaic *polis*. The aspects emphasized in recent work on the early *polis* – the rejection of monarchy, the presence of

<sup>53</sup> Cf. K. A. Raaflaub, "Polis Tyrannos: Zur Entstehung einer politischen Metapher" in G. W. Bowersock et al. (eds.), *Arktouros - Hellenic Studies* presented to B. M. W. Knox (Berlin and New York 1979) 237–52; "Athens 'Ideologie der Macht' und die Freiheit des Tyrannen" in J. M. Balcer et al. (eds.), *Studien zum Attischen Seebund* (Konstanz 1989) 43–86; "Stick and glue: The function of tyranny in fifth-century Athenian democracy," to be published in K. Morgan (ed.), *Popular Tyranny. The whole above discussion of tyranny is indebted to Raaflaub's work.*

<sup>54</sup> Raaflaub, "Athens Ideologie..." (*supra* n. 53) 67.

<sup>55</sup> R. Osborne, *Greece in the Making* (*supra* n. 45) 197.

egalitarian currents, and the formation of a new civic identity – might seem to strengthen the case for continuity. At the very least, they call for reconsideration of the question whether democracy was anything more than a radicalization of trends at work from the beginning. On the other hand, the strongest antidote to overstatements of continuity is perhaps the growing interest in multiple variants and trajectories of the *polis*. In a programmatic text on the “decolonization” of classical studies (by which he meant liberation from a supposedly dominant German paradigm), A. Momigliano listed the overcoming of the “polarization of Greekness between Athens and Sparta”<sup>56</sup> as one of the most urgent tasks. Much has been done to achieve this change of perspective and more systematic comparative studies of variants of the *polis* have suggested new ways of linking the Greek experience to a broader context. For present purposes, the main point is that the variety of *polis* regimes highlights the ambiguity of their archaic origins: the intrinsic transformative potential of the early *polis* could be contained, channeled or reoriented in multiple fashions, and simple contrast between arrested and ongoing development does not take us far.

As for Sparta, the upshot of recent work seems to be a distinct downgrading of Spartan “exceptionalism”. The Spartan regime is, in other words, better understood as a variation of the *polis* pattern than as an anomaly in a class of its own (or even an abortive separate civilization, as Toynbee was tempted to suggest). Three main lines of argument lead to this conclusion. The mythical image of Sparta, created by contemporaries and transmitted to later times, has come under more sustained criticism than before; the Spartan way of life was much less egalitarian than its admirers claimed and less totalitarian than its critics thought, less immune to economic problems and more prone to internal conflict than the classical view would have it. Problems faced and solutions adopted by the Spartan state are in some ways comparable to those of other Archaic *poleis*, even if the results differed (other states, such as Argos, tried with less success to broaden their power basis through conquest). Most importantly, the Spartan system was – contrary to the myth of early invention as well as to modern theories of a much later revolutionary transformation – probably the outcome of several successive waves of change. A Spartan control over the dependent communities known as *perioikoi* prefigured patterns of domination later applied on a larger scale. An eighth-century distribution of conquered land laid the foundations for a citizen-state constituted by a military elite; a further shift towards broadly based hoplite rule, together with an exceptionally strong magistracy (the ephors) seems to have occurred in the seventh century; finally, the culture of austerity which became central to perceptions and memories of Sparta dates from the sixth century and was probably linked to other defensive measures taken after a retreat from far-reaching visions of hegemony.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> A. Momigliano, “Prospettiva 1967 della storia greca”, *Rivista Storica Italiana* 80 (1968) 5–19. See also H.J. Gehrke, *Jenseits von Athen und Sparta: Das dritte Griechenland und seine Staatenwelt* (München 1987).

<sup>57</sup> For a good summary, cf. P. Cartledge, “The peculiar position of Sparta in the development in the development of the Greek city-state”, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 80



Other distinct patterns emerged in various parts of the Greek world. Corinth appears to have been exceptionally attuned to the "realm of utility" (J. Burckhardt), even if it was never the mercantile community for which some modern historians mistook it (Herodotus's oft-quoted remark on craftsmen having a higher status in Corinth than elsewhere in Greece suggests that this was seen as a significant cultural difference). At the same time (and perhaps in part for that very reason), it was – after the demise of a particularly ambitious tyranny – characterized by an unusually stable form of aristocratic rule, seen as a paradigm of well-functioning oligarchy when that concept gained currency. The Cretan *poleis*, long neglected by comparative historians, exemplified the conflictual rather than the consensual side of aristocratic power structures: their history was marked by an "extreme and at the same time highly inventive struggle between community and individual, between order and chaos, limits and freedom".<sup>58</sup> In the Sicilian colonies, tyrants aspiring to military monarchy accumulated more power and engaged in more destructive rivalry than elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

In brief, the basic patterns of the *polis* were open to a very wide range of variations, and this exceptional plasticity is one of the main reasons why it is misleading to speak of the Greek city-state as one type among others. But some variants stand out as more innovative and significant than others; in particular, the originality and civilizational impact of Athenian democracy emerge more clearly when it is set against the background of a whole spectrum of alternatives, rather than a supposedly polar opposite. Before tackling this issue, however, the chronological boundaries of the democratic experience must be defined in more precise terms. The need for a traditionalizing self-image was one of the paradoxical

(1980), section C, 91–108. Cf. also the chapters on Sparta in Murray (*supra* n. 30) 159–80, and K.W. Welwei, *Die griechische Polis* (Stuttgart 1983) 95–150; A.J. Holladay, "Spartan austerity", *Classical Quarterly* 27:1 (1977) 111–26. Cartledge's concluding remarks are worth quoting: "Appropriately, therefore, we end with the ultimate in paradox: the polis which was not a canonical polis and which did as much as any state to hasten the downfall of that mode of organization yet survived longer than any of its major partners and rivals in something like its original political form" (108).

<sup>58</sup> H.J. Gehrke, "Gewalt und Gesetz", *Klio* 79:1 (1997) 67.

<sup>59</sup> Among the Sicilian *poleis*, Syracuse stands out as the most powerful and its history as the most turbulent. Here the pattern of interaction between tyranny, imperialism and democracy (with a brief appearance of the indigenous population as a fourth factor) differs from the Athenian one. Because of the later de-radicalization of the notion of democracy, when used to describe past or present conditions, it is hard to know how democratic the regime which replaced tyranny in 466 BC really was (although an earlier revolt around 490 BC does seem to have involved an alliance of the *demos* with enserfed indigenous peasants, for which there is hardly any parallel in the Greek homeland), and the radical turn taken at the end of the fifth century did not last long. Some authors have argued that the institutional structures of the *poleis* in Sicily and Southern Italy were – despite their early crystallization – marked by a higher level of instability than at home, and that this was not unrelated to the autonomous emergence of Hellenistic kingship in Sicily towards the end of the fourth century (under Agathocles, after a pioneering attempt by Dionysios I). Cf. S.N. Consolo Langer, *Un'imperialismo tra democrazia e tirannide: Siracusa nei secoli V e IV a.C.* (Rome 1997) and S. Berger, *Revolution and Society in Greek Sicily and Southern Italy* (Stuttgart 1992).

cal traits of Athenian democracy; it became stronger in the course of time and culminated in attempts to convert an eponymous hero (Theseus) into a founding father of democracy. Modern interpretations have obviously not followed the same path, but the tendency to prefer a relatively early date for the beginnings of democracy may be seen as an after-effect of traditional attitudes. Contrary to such claims, our discussion will follow those who have argued for a decisive turning-point towards the middle of the fifth century (the disempowerment of the Areiopagos in 461 BC is the most convenient date). Among recent contributions to the debate, the works of Christian Meier, Kurt Raaflaub and Jochen Bleicken have made a particularly strong case for this view.<sup>60</sup> To speak of radical democracy, in contrast to an earlier moderate one, seems misleading in that it suggests a logical progress and a difference in degree where we should rather see an abrupt and risky innovation. The main achievement of the "Athenian revolution" was, to cut a long story short, an unprecedented transfer of power – in the double sense of ongoing decision-making and control over magistrates – to the citizen community acting through the popular assembly and the popular courts.

But although this change was momentous enough to be described as a second revolution (the first being the emergence of the *polis*), it does not easily lend itself to analysis along the lines of modern notions of revolution. There was, of course, a socio-economic background to the transformation: more political power was given to the lowest property class (the *thetes*), who had begun to take a more significant part in warfare when Athens turned to empire-building after the Persian wars. But democracy brought no structural change to the situation of these less propertied citizens (although it enhanced their share in the benefits of empire), and the revolution was clearly not a result of any concerted push for power on their part. The socio-economic basis of Athenian democracy had more to do with long-term structural preconditions (especially the sixth-century integration of the peasantry begun by Solon and completed by Cleisthenes) than with any direct driving forces. On the other hand, it seems clear that the Athenian revolution was not a triumph of democratic theory or ideology. The cumulative impact of political thought and debate had helped to create conditions favourable to radical innovation, but this process did not crystallize into a programme. The transition to democracy was, in other words, a culminating outcome of the transformative dynamic built into the Greek configuration of the political sphere; but the systematic translation of this experience into political theory came later and was disproportionately affected by critical responses to the perceived crises and failures of democracy. This is not to deny the existence of democratic thought as an integral part of Athens' political culture. That question will be considered from another angle below; at this point it must be emphasized that the breakthrough to democracy does not seem to have involved visions, projects or

<sup>60</sup> Christian Meier, *Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen* (Frankfurt/M 1980); *Athen* (Berlin 1993); Kurt A. Raaflaub, "Einleitung und Bilanz: Kleisthenes, Ephialtes und die Begründung der Demokratie" in K.H. Kinzl (ed.) *Demokratia: Der Weg zur Demokratie bei den Griechen* (Darmstadt 1995) 1–54; J. Bleicken, *Die athenische Demokratie* (Paderborn 1985); "Wann begann die griechische Demokratie?", *Historische Zeitschrift* 260:2 (1995) 337–64.

models of the kind which might be seen as grounded in a transcendental dimension (if a case is to be made for the Axial paradigm, it will have to rest on a more comprehensive view of the Greek experience). It is, however, not much easier to interpret the Athenian revolution as the result of an immanent radicalization of a project of autonomy. The course of events owes too much to a contingent mutation of power structures (the surprising victory over a vastly superior imperial power, the subsequent – and inevitable – ascendancy of Athens as a *polis* with imperial ambitions of a new kind, and the polarization of the Greek world around the old and the new hegemonic centre) for such arguments to be plausible. Growing insight into an ongoing progress towards self-government does not seem to have played a decisive role at the crucial moment.

It remains to consider the results of the Athenian revolution. Even if we doubt the direct relevance of a project of autonomy to the practical turning-point, it could be argued that the institutional framework which took shape after the breakthrough came to embody a higher level and a more explicit vision of autonomy than before. Castoriadis has analyzed Athenian institutions in some detail and related their underlying logic to a collective project of self-government with due allowance for the imperative of self-limitation (the latter aspect is reflected in legislative procedures, such as the *graphè paranomon*, but also in the political art of tragedy). He further argues that the whole cultural context of Athenian democracy shows a maturing grasp of the mutually constitutive – but also mutually problematizing – relationship between individual and collective autonomy, and a commitment to creative uses of the new political freedom.<sup>61</sup> Much of this analysis is convincing; the questions to be raised here have to do with limitations and counter-currents that Castoriadis tends to minimize. Apart from the self-limiting insights and mechanisms, he treats the Greek restrictions on autonomy mainly as a matter of failure to develop a universalistic project, with the result that inferior social groups, alien social worlds and whole areas of social life were left out of account. As I will try to show, inclusion and exclusion were interconnected in more complex ways than this view would suggest. Three aspects of fifth-century Athenian political culture – particularism, traditionalism and imperialism – may serve to clarify the point; but on all three counts, it can also be argued that the evidence is ambiguous and suggests a civilizational shift which was cut short by a deepening crisis of the whole *polis* system.

The power structure of the democratic *polis* was incomparably more inclusive than those of other Axial civilizations, but the citizen community remained an elite in that it constituted itself through the exclusion of others. Castoriadis may be right when he argues that too much has been made of slavery as the other side of democracy: the status of the free and self-governing citizen was defined in contrast to a plurality of inferior others, and although the progressive empowerment of the citizen was *ipso facto* a relative downgrading of the unfree worker, the fifth-century breakthrough does not seem to have entailed a massive increase in the number of slaves, and there is some evidence to suggest that the culture of democracy mitigated their condition. The exclusionary logic of Athenian demo-

<sup>61</sup> Cf. the various texts quoted in n. 4.

cracy was most evident in measures taken to bar aliens from membership in the citizen community. But the counterweights should not be underestimated: the *polis* which adopted rigidly nativist norms of citizenship became at the same time an unprecedented cosmopolitan cultural centre, aspired to cultural leadership in the Greek world, and developed a more active interest in foreign cultures. One interesting – and often overlooked – aspect of this opening was Athenian receptivity to Persian culture after victory over the Persian empire.<sup>62</sup>

The specific religious traditions of a *polis* were an essential part of its collective identity. Here the most striking feature of fifth-century Athens is the vitality and integrative capacity of its religious culture. Athenian polytheism was neither on the defensive nor in retreat: it responded actively to the new situation and proved capable of incorporating new cults on its own terms. The four main cases of that kind exemplify the complexity of Athenian culture. The god Pan was linked to the most archaic region of Greece (Arcadia) and located on the boundary between human and non-human domains; the Thracian goddess Bendis was identified with a people who had perhaps become the barbarians *par excellence* for imperial Athens; Theseus, much more actively worshipped after the ritual return of his bones, embodied Athens' connection to a heroic past; and the god Asclepius was a wholly benign divinity who thus prefigured later efforts to mellow the archaic side of the pantheon. This vigorous and self-regenerating polytheistic tradition coexisted with the intellectual currents often described as the Greek Enlightenment. Although it would be thoroughly misleading to portray the latter as a principled adversary of traditional religion, tensions were inevitable; whether they reached crisis point in the late fifth century is a controversial issue, but if there was a crisis, we must think of it as a clash between two sides of the Athenian cultural universe.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, Athenian democracy developed in close connection with an imperial project which was eventually defeated by the other major Greek power (with the support of the Persian Empire). The importance of imperial benefits for the flowering of Athenian culture is undisputed; the record of the Athenian imperial power is more controversial, but will not be discussed here; in the present context, it is the affirmation of empire by advocates of democracy that should be stressed. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the Athenian vision of autonomy internalized the imperial project. In the deservedly well-known and oft-quoted funeral oration attributed to Pericles by Thucydides, "the empire that we now possess" figures unequivocally among the values to be defended. On the other hand, the democratic model did not function and was not perceived as a mere instrument of empire. The evidence suggests that democratic regimes (in the specific sense accepted here) emerged elsewhere under Athenian influence, but not always as a result of direct intervention: the Athenian example could be

<sup>62</sup> Cf. M.C. Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century BC: A Study in Cultural Receptivity* (Cambridge 1997).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. R. Parker, *Athenian Religion* (Oxford 1996) 152–98 (on new gods) and 199–217 (on the question of a religious crisis). Cf. also Ch. Schubert, *Die Macht des Volkes und die Ohnmacht des Denkens* (Stuttgart 1993).

imitated, ideological motivation seems to have played some role, and in one case (Syracuse), a democratic regime took a more radical turn in the wake of a conflict with Athens. As for the ideological affirmation of empire, the above-mentioned funeral oration shows that it went together with other themes which suggest different directions. Castoriadis has – somewhat one-sidedly – stressed the role of cultural creation as the ultimate rationale of autonomy. By contrast, Domenico Musti interprets the same text as a major step towards value-orientations more akin to modern democracy: he takes the new – and very distinctively Athenian – understanding and acceptance of individual freedom to signify a more positive attitude to ordinary life and a potentially pacifist ethic that might – if history had taken a different course – have clashed with the dominant visions of hegemony and expansion.<sup>64</sup> The hermeneutical points at issue are beyond the scope of this paper; but we may see the ongoing conflict of interpretations as symptomatic of the exceptionally complex and innovative cultural developments associated with Athenian democracy.

### Between religion and philosophy

7. The main theme of this paper is the political dynamic of the transformations that took place between the eighth and the fifth century; the cultural factors most directly relevant to our discussion are therefore those at work within the political sphere. More far-reaching questions as to intellectual preconditions and ramifications can only be briefly touched upon.

The obvious point of departure is the contribution of Greek religion to the political breakthrough. Here we can do no more than summarize a few widely noted aspects of this background and consider them in light of the theoretical issues raised at the beginning of our discussion. Many otherwise divergent interpretations of Greek religion agree on an essential characteristic of its gods: although they are individualized figures, they can also be understood (and distinguished from the more thoroughly anthropomorphic or more emphatically superhuman divinities of other religions) as powers of a specific kind and active within a specific domain.<sup>65</sup> This structural side of divine identity is further reinforced by the polytheistic division of authority and by the presence of impersonal (or only nominally personified) forces alongside the gods. A rationalizing trend was thus built into the religious imagination – not only because the vision of the pantheon as a plurality of powers lent itself to further objectivation, but also in the sense that the tension between the complementary logics of polytheism – individuation and categorization – could stimulate reflexion. And the same applies to the

<sup>64</sup> D. Musti, *Demokratia: Origini di un'idea* (Rome 1991).

<sup>65</sup> For forceful statements of this view by two very different authors, cf. W. Schadewaldt, *Die Anfänge der Philosophie bei den Griechen* (Frankfurt/M 1978) 87–91, and J.P. Vernant, *Religions, histoires, raisons* (Paris 1979) 9–11. Vernant puts it as follows: “Un dieu est une puissance qui traduit une forme d'action, un type de pouvoir”; the French distinction between “puissance” and “pouvoir” makes this sentence difficult to translate.

ambiguity of relations between divine and human worlds: the deified powers can manifest themselves in benign as well as destructive ways. The relative importance of this rationalizing potential can only be judged on the basis of comparison with other types of polytheism. Very little has so far been done to explore that field, but two obvious contrasts may be noted. On the one hand, the problems and possibilities noted above must have been more salient in the case of Greek polytheism than they could be for religious cultures which consistently defined the human condition in terms of service to the gods (Mesopotamia is the prime case in point). On the other hand, the Chinese counter-example shows that the rationalization of religion can take a different course. Here polytheism was relegated to a lower level of the religious universe and subordinated to the alliance of sacred kingship with an increasingly de-personalized cosmic order. The downgraded gods became objects of bureaucratic supervision.<sup>66</sup>

The comparison with China brings us to another fundamental feature of Archaic Greek religion: the primacy of the *polis*. Until recently, this institutional context was less well understood than the products of the religious imagination, but the concept of *polis* religion is now widely used, and it has far-reaching implications for our view of more familiar aspects of the field. To speak of *polis* religion is first of all to emphasize that the formation of the *polis* involved an extensive restructuring of religious life. Neither the gods nor the elementary practices relating to them were invented in the eighth century, but the evidence suggests that a new framework was created, and that we should see the religious transformation as an integral part of the political one. The primacy of the *polis* ruled out any institutionalization of other authorities over religious life, be it a separate priesthood or a sacred text. On the other hand, the organization of religious activities became an integral and essential part of the self-institution of the *polis*. This was most evident in the strong emphasis on temple-building: "It is the temples that are to form the most elaborate and most representative buildings of a Greek city, the temples and not the palaces, or the pyramids, the public baths, the hippodroms of other civilizations."<sup>67</sup> The temples were also central to the economic life of the *polis*: they allowed the "accumulation and permanence of communal riches at one spot" and "*de facto* became the banks of the state".<sup>68</sup>

Far from being a mere superstructure or an ideological construct, religion was thus central to the whole collective life of the *polis*, from the most material to the most symbolic level. But the eight-century elaboration of the polytheistic universe went beyond institutional imperatives and gave expression to a new need for comprehensive orientation. The rise of the *polis* was accompanied by an exceptionally vigorous and imaginative effort to articulate the world.<sup>69</sup> From the

<sup>66</sup> Cf. J. Lévi, *Les fonctionnaires divins* (Paris 1989).

<sup>67</sup> W. Burkert, "The formation of Greek religion at the close of the Dark Ages", *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 3d series 10 (1992) 536.

<sup>68</sup> Burkert (*supra* n. 67) 540. Cf. also F. de Polignac, *Cults, Territory and the Origins of the Greek City-State* (Chicago 1995) on the role of temple-building (both at the centre and on the boundaries) in the foundation of the *polis*.

<sup>69</sup> Yves Barel speaks of an "ambition to say everything about the world" and to "set in order

beginning, this aspiration took a very peculiar turn: it found its main outlet in epic poetry, rather than sacred texts in the proper sense. The fact that the epic genre crystallized into two very different paradigms – Homer and Hesiod – is another indication of pluralizing trends at work. More or less dominant views, values and attitudes could develop, but did not constitute a fully-fledged orthodoxy. Hesiod's didactic version of epic poetry was, moreover, a major innovation which pointed towards further intellectual experiments. All in all, the world-ordering imaginary of the early *polis* seems to have reflected and radicalized the de-centred pattern evident in political life. Sovereignty, divided and contested on the institutional level, was absent from the most advanced interpretive ventures – but not from the constructed religious universe, where it reappeared in the guise of a highest god whose somewhat uncertain status allowed for speculations which could in due course move towards more emphatic notions of supremacy or take the opposite road to fusion with an impersonal cosmic totality.

The questions of sovereignty and order within the divine world touch upon other aspects of *polis* religion. In connection with the institutional innovations of the eighth century, boundaries between human and divine realms were drawn in a more precise and explicit fashion; as we have seen, the result fell far short of orthodoxy, but some basic assumptions can be reconstructed. The overwhelming disparity of power between gods and humans has led some interpreters to describe "Homeric society" as a continuous hierarchy with the Olympian gods at the top, and the enormous stress on the difference between mortals and immortals – a theme probably more prominent in Archaic Greek culture than anywhere else – might seem to confirm that impression. But the emphasis on human finitude is, as more balanced accounts have shown, linked to a limited and ambiguous, yet unmistakably significant affirmation of human autonomy. This orientation was reinforced by an inbuilt indeterminacy of the other world, due to the problematic relationship between subjective and objective sides of divinity, as well as between personified and impersonal forces within the cosmic order as a whole. In that sense, we can speak of an incipient anthropocentric turn in Archaic Greek religion; and it is precisely this anthropocentric element that raises doubts about the anthropomorphic stance so often attributed to Greek polytheism. As Vernant argues, the issue is irremediably ambiguous: did the Greeks model the gods on humans or did they envision the human body – at least in the prime of life – as "an image or a reflection of the divine",<sup>70</sup> and think of this "presentification of the invisible" as an ennobling of human reality? This equivocal relationship would seem to reflect a certain distancing of the human world from the divine one, and by the same token a new interpretive latitude for reflections on their mutual involvement. But more importantly, the practical autonomy implicit in the eighth-century reconstruction of the religious universe – the double primacy of politics and poetry, pre-empting the role elsewhere assumed by religious institutions – exceeded the vision of autonomy articulated at the level of narrative and belief;

what human beings can and should know and believe" (Y. Barel, *Le héros avant la politique* (Paris 1984) 44).

<sup>70</sup> J.-P. Vernant, *Entre mythe et politique* (Paris 1996) 372.

this discrepancy may be seen as the starting-point for a gradual shift towards more emphasis on human initiative and responsibility. Historians of Greek political thought have shown how the notion of a good order, willed but neither prescribed in detail nor guaranteed by the gods, gave way to ideas of a man-made and therefore contestable order.

In view of all this, it might be suggested that Archaic Greek religion cuts across the divide between Axial and pre-Axial cultures. The intramundane character of Greek religion is indisputable, but it represents a distinctive combination of continuity and discontinuity between the human and divine domains, more innovative at the level of institutional forms than with regard to its interpretive contents, but for that very reason open to developments which enlarged the space of reflection without any wholesale disestablishment of religious traditions. There is, however, yet another aspect of Greek religion which must be taken into account when we compare it to other relevant cases. Not only the way of demarcating and coordinating the divine and human worlds, but also the relationship between mainstream and countercurrents took a very peculiar turn in Archaic Greece. As we have seen, the differentiation of orthodoxy and heterodoxy – more polarized in some cases than others – figures prominently among the defining features of the Axial paradigm. The dominant trends of Greek religion do not match up to the models of orthodoxy; but there was, on the other side, a cluster of traditions which differs no less from prevalent patterns of heterodoxy. Both the multiple interconnections with the mainstream and the internal diversity of this less official religious life cast doubt on all stark dichotomies. A common denominator of the currents which deviated from *polis* religion has not proved easy to establish, and it must be defined with due allowance for the partial or indirect integration into the *polis*. Some analysts have stressed a supposedly more satisfying response to religious needs of the individual, as distinct from those of the political community; but apart from the fact that such a trend is far from uniformly evident in all the cults or movements concerned, the reference to “the individual” as a meta-historical reality discovered, recognized or liberated at a certain stage of cultural development is misleading (the transformations of Greek culture beyond its Archaic beginning have not infrequently been interpreted in such terms). As Vernant points out (in a polemic against Dumont’s account of the progress of the individual from extra-mundane withdrawal to intra-mundane activism), the Greek individual remained “an individual in the city”;<sup>71</sup> *polis* culture had its distinctive patterns, directions and limits of individuation.

The most convincing account of aspirations common to the variants of “Greek mysticism” (to use a rather misleading but widely accepted label) stresses the “search for a more direct, more intimate, and more personal contact with the gods”.<sup>72</sup> The motive force was, in other words, an effort to bypass or transgress the boundaries between the human and the divine, as defined – but not dogmati-

<sup>71</sup> J.-P. Vernant, “L’individu dans la cité” in J.-P. Vernant, *L’individu. la mort, l’amour* (Paris 1989) 211–32.

<sup>72</sup> J.-P. Vernant, “Greek Religion” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion* vol. 6 (New York 1987) 112.



zed – by *polis* religion. In view of this tension between two clusters of traditions, we might speak of a dual institution of Greek religion: there was, of course, no frontal conflict between incompatible cultures or doctrines, but key elements of a collectively foregrounded framework were contested by currents active at a distance, at the margin of public life, or in the uncontrolled spaces opened up by the multi-central dynamic of Greek civilization. It seems clear that this pattern of religious differentiation drew on – but did not simply reproduce – the intercivili- zational syncretism which Archaic Greece had inherited from its Bronze Age ancestors. Attempts to identify Cretan sources of Greek religion have ranged across the whole spectre of cults and beliefs, from alien aspects of the central figure in the official pantheon (the supposedly Cretan side to Zeus) to the movement most plausibly described as a genuine religious counter-culture (Or- phism). While the details of this debate are obviously beyond the competence of outsiders, the vast amount of more or less conclusive evidence leaves no doubt about the existence of a Cretan connection, however elusive its manifestations may be.

As far as the present author can judge, no other polytheistic religion de- veloped a comparable internal division. This is another reason for underlining the singularity of the Greek case: notwithstanding the intra-mundane character of Greek religion, the combination of divergent currents generated a cultural dyna- mic which has some affinities with the otherwise different constellations summed up in the Axial paradigm. This will become clearer when we consider the background to the beginnings of Greek philosophy. But before moving on to that part of the field, a few words should be said about the main forces at work outside the orbit of *polis* religion. The mystery cults are perhaps the most straightforward case: they functioned under the jurisdiction of the *polis*, but were practiced by distinctive religious communities which could be more exclusive or more inclusi- ve than the *polis* (in the most important cases of the latter type, women, slaves and foreigners were admitted), and the religious needs and sensibilities involved were of the border-crossing kind described above. Here we can speak of an established and delimited counterpart to *polis* religion, institutionalized as such and at the same time – through remarkably effective rules of secrecy – confined to a lower level of public presence. The Dionysos cult – perhaps the most controver- sial aspect of Greek religion, and certainly the most attractive to modern interpre- ters in search of religious alternatives – is a more complex phenomenon. On the one hand, a noteworthy attempt was made to integrate this countercurrent into *polis* religion, at a more visible level than the mysteries (the cohabitation of Apollo and Dionysos at Delphi is the most striking detail). On the other hand, the fundamental otherness of the Dionysian religion continued to assert itself in various ways. Dionysos stood for a different state of religious consciousness, perhaps best described as “an experience of intensified mental power”;<sup>73</sup> for the forms of collective effervescence which made such experiences possible, and which may be seen as religious institutions *sui generis*; last but not least, the

<sup>73</sup> W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford 1985) 162.

conspicuous role of female cult groups in the Dionysian religion stood in obvious contrast to the gender structure of *polis* society. All these deviant features gave rise to the belief – long accepted by historians of Greek religion but now abandoned – that the Dionysos cult had been imported from elsewhere after the first formation of the pantheon (in fact, it seems to have been a part of the syncretic religion which took shape before the end of the Bronze Age). But the most productive synthesis of the two aspects of the Dionysian religion – the integrated and the estranging – can perhaps be seen in the role which it played in the invention of the new cultural genre of tragedy, firmly grounded in the institutional framework of the *polis* but conducive to a new kind of reflection on its problems.<sup>74</sup>

The third of the currents usually mentioned as a case of “Greek mysticism” is the most sharply opposed to *polis* religion. The very existence of Orphic teachings and an Orphic movement is, admittedly, a controversial issue; here I will, however, assume that scholars in the field – especially W.K.C. Guthrie – have made a convincing case for a cautiously defined Orphism as a trend in Greek religious thought, from the sixth century onwards. Orphism was, on this view, “a religion which ran counter to the most typical and most cherished of Greek ideas”, inasmuch as it “asserted that all men had divinity within them, and that they should strive their hardest to throw off everything else and emerge as wholly divine and immortal”.<sup>75</sup> The ritual quest for purity and the rejection of animal sacrifice which accompanied these beliefs were, by the same token, symptomatic of an estranged attitude to the *polis*: “refusal of the violence which the city had inherited from the world of the heroes, and which it had incorporated into the core of its own political rationality”.<sup>76</sup>

It is therefore tempting to think of Orphism as at least a move towards religious rejection of the world (of the *polis* together with essential aspects of its religious universe). But here we can only briefly outline the most basic preliminaries of a comparative approach to this issue. On the one hand, the currents in question never posed an effective challenge to the supremacy of *polis* religion. It is very unclear to what extent we can speak of Orphism as a coherent movement; and as for intellectual expressions, its cosmogonies were variations on the more widely shared themes of Archaic mythology (with a distinctive emphasis on the vision of an original unity to be restored, but no fundamentally other frame of reference). The rejectionist trend was, in other words, successfully contained by a religious culture of an altogether different kind. On the other hand, the religious

<sup>74</sup> On Dionysos, cf. H. Jeanmaire, *Dionysos, histoire du culte de Bacchus* (Paris 1951); and L. Gernet's review of this book, “Dionysos et la religion dionisiaque: Elements hérités et traits originaux” in L. Gernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique* (Paris 1968) 63–89; W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods* (Boston 1955) 145–82; more recently, the chapters in Burkert (*supra* n. 73) 161–67, and L. Bruit Zaidman and P. Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City* (Cambridge 1992) 198–207.

<sup>75</sup> Guthrie (*supra* n. 73) 326; cf. also W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (New York 1966).

<sup>76</sup> M. Vegeti, *L'etica degli antichi* (Rome 1989) 79–80.

imagery of the soul in search of immortality (opposed to the *polis* in pursuit of power) was, at a later stage, appropriated by philosophical thought and thereby transformed – most effectively by Plato – to such an extent that the original source has proved difficult to reconstruct. The results of this development were to have a significant impact on a religion rooted in other traditions (the Christian version of monotheism); but the most influential analyses of religious world rejection have focused on more clear-cut types and taken little note of this elusive but intriguing case.

8. The philosophical transformation of Orphic ideas is only one aspect of a much more complex process: the interaction between religious traditions and philosophical currents during the Archaic and Classical phases of Greek history. We must therefore conclude this discussion with a brief glance at the philosophical aspect of the Greek breakthrough. Pre-Socratic thought is a notoriously controversial field, and the intrinsic importance of the subject has often tempted interpreters to stretch the evidence. The following comments will not enter into hermeneutical debates; rather, our aim is to draw on some widely accepted results of recent scholarship and use them to clarify the terms and tasks of comparative inquiry.

For the two theorists confronted at the beginning and criticized at later points in our discussion, the invention of philosophy is a major part of the Greek achievement, but they differ on the question of its relationship to other innovations. Castoriadis stresses the connection between social and intellectual aspects of the unfolding project of autonomy; the progress of philosophical discourse towards more structured and self-reflexive forms is therefore, as he sees it, closely linked to the democratic transformation of the polis, and the “Greek Enlightenment” of the fifth century is the culminating point of these convergent developments. Eisenstadt’s comparative framework leads, as we have seen, to rather different conclusions; the continuity of an archaic religious culture and the correspondingly limited impact of philosophical reflection set the Greek case apart from more radical Axial transformations. The argument outlined below will take issue with both sides. The interconnections between intellectual and political changes during the centuries in question are, on the one hand, too complex and significant for the overall pattern to be described as an incomplete version of the Axial turn; but on the other hand, the relationship between philosophy and the *polis* is too ambiguous and the diversity of interpretive strategies too great to be subsumed under the normative logic of autonomy. This picture becomes even more complicated if we accept that the breakthrough involved a “dialogue between philosophy and religion”<sup>77</sup> rather than a unilateral self-constitution of philosophy, and that the religious side to this interactive process was more than a defence or perpetuation of inherited traditions. The dialogue was the very *modus operandi* of the breakthrough, rather than a sequel to it, and it constituted a framework for ongoing exploration and redefinition of the relationship between rationality and its other.

<sup>77</sup> S.C. Humphreys, “Dynamics of the Greek breakthrough: The dialogue between philosophy and religion” in S.N. Eisenstadt (*supra* n.9) 92–110.

Over-rationalized readings of the philosophical cosmologies constructed by Greek thinkers from the sixth century onwards have now been laid to rest; the notion of a complete break with mythological visions of the world (and, by the same token, a speculative but genuine prefiguration of modern scientific inquiry) gave way to a more nuanced understanding of continuities and discontinuities in Archaic Greek thought. On the one hand, the "first philosophers" inherited and continued a traditionalizing project that had already found expression in reflexive uses of myth, especially the canonical texts of Homer and Hesiod. As various analysts have shown, the "poetic ontology"<sup>78</sup> of the early epics is made up of themes, categories and interpretive patterns which lend themselves to further elaboration. On the other hand, the persistence of archaic concerns in changing contexts is a recurrent theme in the study of Presocratic thought: the "legacy of an aesthetic vision of reality"<sup>79</sup> (articulated through myth) survived the shift from narrative to theorizing, and cosmological thought continued along the lines of an "increasingly abstract rationalization of the idea of divinity".<sup>80</sup> Growing insight into these genealogical connections went together with attempts to redefine the novelty of philosophical discourse. For all the archaic heritage of Ionian cosmology, there are still good reasons to speak of an epochal shift towards more consistently impersonal view of cosmic forces, and at the same time – as Vernant has emphasized – a search for explanatory models closer to the natural and technical patterns of everyday life. But an even more innovative turn was taken with the commitment to argument and debate as ways of settling interpretive conflicts, including those of rival cosmologies.

At this point, the question of social preconditions for the sixth-century philosophical turn must be considered. This is not a matter of widely differing opinions: the only approach with any claim to plausibility centres on the political background, i.e. structures and dynamics of the *polis*. Their earliest beginnings were – as has now been shown beyond doubt – already reflected and thematized in the Homeric poems, but the more far-reaching implications that became visible and provoked thought during the first phase of the Archaic period were in due course translated into new interpretive frameworks. The most systematic argument in this vein is to be found in the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant: G.E.R. Lloyd has explored the same problematic from a somewhat different angle.<sup>81</sup> For our purposes, the relevant connections can be summed up in four points. First, the

<sup>78</sup> "Dichterische Ontologie" is a term used by Schadewaldt (*supra* n. 64).

<sup>79</sup> B. Sandywell, *Presocratic Reflexivity: The Construction of Philosophical Discourse c. 600–450 BC* (London 1996) 41.

<sup>80</sup> O. Gigon, "Die Theologie der Vorsokratiker" in *La notion du divin depuis Homère jusqu'à Platon – Fondation Hardt, Entretiens t. 1* (Genève 1954) 135.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. especially J.P. Vernant, *Les origines de la pensée grecque* (Paris 1975), as well as numerous essays by the same author; G.E.R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge 1990); *Methods and Problems in Greek Science* (Cambridge 1991); *Adversaries and Authorities* (Cambridge 1996). It should be noted that some early essays by G. Vlastos (especially "Equality and justice in early Greek cosmologies" first published in *Classical Philology* 1947) broke new ground in this regard, but they did not draw the systematic conclusions later developed by Vernant.

anti-monarchic structure of the *polis* was conducive to new ways of thinking about the world, less bound to notions of sovereignty and more open to ideas of order without a dominant centre (Vernant refers to a "crisis of sovereignty", but in view of the historical distance between the downfall of Mycenaean Greece and the flowering of the *polis*, it would seem more appropriate to speak of a long-term decomposition and redefinition of sovereignty). The first symptoms of a significant shift in this direction can be seen in early Archaic variations on mythological themes, but the change was gradual and only came to full fruition in sixth-century cosmology. Second, the formation of a political community made up of multiple, interrelated and competing actors made it easier to think of order in general as a dynamic and changing balance. The *polis* was characterized by a firmly established rule of citizens over non-citizens, but also by repeated efforts to put rule among citizens on a more egalitarian foundation; hierarchy thus coexisted with different possible versions of its opposite. The political context of Greek thought was, in other words, inherently favourable to a pluralization of perspectives. Lloyd stresses the plurality of political models of the cosmos, but he also mentions alternative models based on analogies with living beings and artifacts; his own discussion shows, however, that the two latter conceptions emerged in connection with the Platonic quest for a more emphatically unitary image of the *polis*, and are therefore best understood as extreme offshoots of differentiation within the more fundamental political paradigm. Third, there is an obvious affinity between the agonistic character of political life – exemplified by disputes in law-courts and assemblies – and the strong emphasis on mutual criticism and debate between rival schools of thought. This does not mean that political practices were simply transferred to the intellectual field; rather, the principle of competition through dispute acquired new dimensions when applied to an unfolding plurality of interpretive traditions. The adversarial logic of intellectual life, much more characteristic of ancient Greece than of any other Axial civilization, pushed the pluralism of interpretive frameworks beyond the limits of practical life and inspired attempts to immunize the autonomy of thought against the vicissitudes of history. The distinctively Greek search for secure foundations – elements, axioms or forms – can, as Lloyd argues, be understood as a strategic move in the contest of schools, but it opened up new horizons far beyond the historical context. Finally, the crystallization and explicit confrontation of alternative regimes within the framework of the *polis* – made possible by the fifth-century democratic mutation – gave a more radical twist to the pluralizing dynamic that had been at work from the outset. This was not a precondition for intellectual pluralism (the diversity of world-views during the last century of the Archaic period was far ahead of political forms), but the codification of constitutional pluralism ruled out any possibility of a political orthodoxy that might have served – as it did in China – to back up a broader intellectual unification.

In short, the political roots of philosophy have to do with specific features of the *polis*, but this does not mean that cosmological models were mere projections of institutional patterns: the line of argument outlined above stresses the enabling impact of politics on intellectual life, i.e. the autonomy, diversity and productive

rivalry of the interpretive projects which emerged in response to the historical experience of the *polis*. But there was a further side to this innovative dynamic. The pluralism that became such a distinctive characteristic of Greek thought was not only a matter of multiple ways to model the world; at an even more fundamental level, it involved different contexts of access to the world and premises of ontological discourse.<sup>82</sup> The Ionian focus on entities encountered in the observable world did not remain unchallenged; more specifically, the currents traditionally linked to an Italian background took another path. Even if we allow for the highly sceptical conclusions that follow from recent scholarship on the Pythagorean question, it would seem that a case can still be made for connections between a particular concern with the soul and the distinctively Greek dichotomy of being and appearance.<sup>83</sup>

The importance of this alternative tradition is twofold. On the one hand, it appears – although the evidence is extremely elusive – to have drawn on and transformed some aspects of the religious counterculture discussed above. On the other hand, the reinterpreted religious themes became crucial ingredients of a later philosophical synthesis. Once again, the dialogue between religion and philosophy – and its differentiating effect on philosophical traditions – emerges as a crucial aspect of the Greek breakthrough. But this background was not unrelated to the political one. Vernant's analysis of Archaic thought suggests that the search for remedies against a perceived crisis of the *polis* brought the less official forms of religious life into the public arena: purifying rituals, originally linked to dissent from *polis* religion, could be seen as emergency measures to ensure the regeneration of the community. Although this rapprochement did not result in lasting integration, it broadened the scope of intellectual responses to political change, and the philosophical sublimations of religious themes outside the mainstream interacted with ideas closer to the political realities of the times. Vernant analyzes the explicit ontological turn (taken by Parmenides and probably interconnected with religious countercultures active at the same time) from this angle: the philosophical concept of being "expresses the same aspiration to unity, the same search for a principle of stability and permanence which we have already, at the dawn of the city, encountered in social and political thought, and which reappears in some currents of religious thought, such as Orphism".<sup>84</sup>

The search for social foundations of Greek thought thus leads to a strong emphasis on the political sources of intellectual autonomy. This point stands out in full relief if we compare the Greek case to other Axial cultures. Here we can, in particular, draw on the work of G.E.R. Lloyd and Nathan Sivin; their account of contrasts and parallels between Greece and China is probably the most detailed

<sup>82</sup> This is strongly emphasized by Schädewaldt (*supra* n.64).

<sup>83</sup> For the most forceful critique of traditional beliefs about Pythagoras, cf. W. Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (Cambridge, MA 1972); for different accounts, both compatible with a cautious approach to the evidence, cf. Schädewaldt (*supra* n. 64) 267–99, and J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* I (London 1979) 100–20.

<sup>84</sup> J.-P. Vernant, "La formation de la pensée positive dans la Grèce antique" in J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* II (Paris 1971) 121.

comparison so far attempted of Axial philosophical cultures.<sup>85</sup> As they show, this is neither a case of incommensurate world-views nor of mutually exclusive intellectual choices, and some notable achievements of one side have less developed or less clear-cut parallels on the other. But the evidence shows – beyond reasonable doubt – that a cluster of interrelated cultural orientations made the overall patterns and trends of Chinese thought very different from its Greek counterpart. The unquestioned principle of monarchy was closely linked to “unifying and centripetal”<sup>86</sup> models of order, and a correspondingly strong “sense of the seamlessness of the whole constituted by the social and cosmic order”.<sup>87</sup> Rulers – rather than organized or imagined communities – remained the chief audience for theorizing intellectuals, and this was conducive to stress on consensus rather than an open-ended rivalry of schools, as well as on the authority of canonical texts. The ontological premises and the patterns of communication converge on a shared problematic of socio-cosmic order, much more pervasive and symptomatic of ultimate agreement than any themes in Greek thought.

Such contrasts are all the more significant because of the affinities highlighted by the Axial paradigm; a primacy or at least a particularly sustained dynamic of the political sphere can be attributed to both Greece and China. But the two cases differ with regard to core political institutions as well as intellectual responses to political change. Some basic contrasts have already been noted in connection with the formation and development of the *polis*; the politically conditioned distance of speculative thought from political priorities is a distinctive feature of the Greek tradition. We must now consider another aspect of this constellation. If the rival but rationally commensurable models of philosophical discourse were – however indirectly – related to a political background, it remains to be seen whether – or to what extent – philosophical projects could be retranslated into political ones. It seems clear that effective use was made of philosophical ideas by political reformers. The most illuminating case study is Lévêque’s and Vidal-Naquet’s analysis of Cleisthenes’s reform; as they see it, Greek political thought tended “to re-employ, for the construction of *political systems*, concepts that had their origin in the life of the city but that had previously been diverted from their meaning”,<sup>88</sup> and the geometric spirit of the Cleisthenean constitution reflects not so much the teachings of a particular school as the more widely shared modes of reasoning into which philosophers had transfigured the practical rationality of the *polis*. And although the evidence is very patchy, a recent survey suggests that Cleisthenes’s radical rationalization of the Athenian polity may have been less exceptional than historians have often argued.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Lloyd (*supra* n. 80); N. Sivin, “Comparing Greek and Chinese philosophy and science” in N. Sivin, *Medicine, Philosophy and Religion in Ancient China* (Aldershot 1995) 1–11.

<sup>86</sup> Sivin (*supra* n. 85) 9.

<sup>87</sup> Lloyd, *Adversaries and Authorities* (*supra* n. 80) 127.

<sup>88</sup> Lévêque and Vidal-Naquet (*supra* n. 4) 53.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. F. Ruzé, “Les tribus et la décision politique dans les cités grecques archaïques et classiques” in Nicolet (*supra* n. 28) 69–72.

This return of speculative constructs to their practical source was, however, not a major factor in the most important transformation of the *polis*: the Athenian transition to democracy. As noted above, this was a mutation brought about by converging internal and external currents, aided by the prior development of political thought but not guided by a new ideological model. The absence of a pre-articulated democratic project has often been seen as proof of a fundamental discord between Greek thought and Greek politics in its most radical mode. But although it seems clear that there was no positive and comprehensive theory of democracy (and no systematic analysis before Aristotle), it does not follow that the democratic idea found no reflexive expression. We can speak of contemporary perceptions of democracy (Raaflaub) or an emerging democratic imaginary (Castoriadis), but the ramifications of this new theme in fifth-century thought are not easily reducible to a common denominator and often overlooked by those who take their cue from more transparent cases. In the present context, four aspects are of particular importance.

First, the fifth-century responses to the democratic turn followed a well-established and peculiar pattern of Greek political thought; it had always been averse to systematization and at the same time capable of expressing itself through a variety of cultural genres. Together with other fifth-century developments, the democratic mutation gave rise to new outlets for political thought, such as history and tragedy (the latter was invented before the emergence of democracy, but matured through engagement with the problematic of a democratic *polis* in pursuit of imperial power). Second, the most instructive texts in question reflect disputes about democracy, rather than specific or partisan interpretations of democracy, and often in such an ambiguous way that the position of the author remains a matter of debate. Sensitivity to the problematic of democracy did not *ipso facto* translate into strategies of theorizing.<sup>90</sup> The most striking case in point is Thucydides, whose history of the Peloponnesian War contains the most forceful statement of the democratic self-image as well as a thoroughly demystifying account of democratic practices, but it can also be argued that his underlying conception of the *polis* as an historical actor is based on democratic premises.<sup>91</sup> Third, this new – multiform, ambiguous and exploratory – phase of political thought could only enter into limited contact with the philosophical traditions which had moved towards more rigorous modes of discourse. The most plausible case for a cosmology with democratic connotations has been made for Democritus, and even that rests on rather tenuous foundations.<sup>92</sup> Finally, the sophistic movement, indisputably central to fifth-century thought, is best seen as

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Kurt A. Raaflaub, "Contemporary perceptions of democracy in fifth-century Athens," *Classica et Mediaevalia* XL (1989) 33–70. On tragedy, cf. particularly Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy* (Baltimore 1993).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. M. Pope, "Thucydides and democracy", *Historia* 37 (1988) 276–96.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. C. Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* (Cambridge 1988) 192–264; but even this author concedes that "the norms postulated by atomism apply to all men qua human beings, not merely qua members of a social order or citizens of a democracy," and that Democritus "could not in the end cope" with questions about democratic politics (192, 264).



a cluster of different – sometimes sharply opposed – responses to a new intellectual constellation, rather than a proto-modern precursor of the Enlightenment (variations on the latter theme range from Hegel to Castoriadis). Although there was no overarching synthesis of progress in philosophical argument and innovation in political thought, we may speak of a seminal encounter between the two trends: the sophists seem to have responded – in widely varying ways – to the combined challenges of a more reflexive focus on the foundations of knowledge and a more diversified political debate. There is no doubt that significant advances of democratic thinking did occur in that context (Castoriadis and Barel have, in particular, made a strong case for Protagoras as a pioneering theorist of democracy). But the movement as a whole was certainly not committed to a democratic project, nor is there any evidence to suggest an overall shift in that direction.

The distinction between *nomos* and *physis* and its role in the development of Greek thought must be reconsidered in light of those observations. Neither the intrinsic importance of the two concepts nor the contribution of the sophistic movement to the debate around them can be contested. But the implications of the distinction are less clear-cut than Castoriadis would like to claim. In line with the growing emphasis on human initiative and responsibility, the meaning of *nomos* shifted from an established and *ipso facto* valid order to a man-made and therefore relativizable one. On the other hand, it is only in fifth-century thought that *physis* comes to be understood as a counterpart to man-made order, and the first reference to *nomos* as the opposite of *physis* has to do with the increasingly visible diversity of cultures, especially the differences between the Greeks and their Oriental neighbours (more strongly accentuated after the experience of the Persian Wars). Protagoras seems to have been the first to combine the pluralistic conception of *nomos* with a defence of human autonomy in general and its democratic form in particular. But the strongest version of the contrast between *nomos* and *physis* appears in the later Sophists and tends to downgrade *nomos* (increasingly linked with opinion and illusion) in relation to the more fundamental realities of *physis*. In brief, it can be argued that the problematic of *nomos* and *physis* represents a particularly revealing crossroads of Greek thought, but it cannot be seen as an unambiguous expression of ideas or insights that would suffice to define the Greek breakthrough in contradistinction to other Axial cultures.<sup>93</sup>

#### Concluding remarks: The political civilization

We should now briefly return to the two interpretive models outlined at the beginning and reexamine their respective claims on the basis of our historical survey. The problematic of autonomy – in the specific sense of human society's self-instituting and self-questioning capacity – is obviously central to the Greek

<sup>93</sup> This discussion draws on F. Heinmann, *Nomos und Physis* (Basel 1965).

experience; visions, practices and expressions of autonomy were involved in structural as well as intellectual transformations.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the overview of developments during the Archaic and Classical epochs has highlighted the need for a more flexible and open-ended conceptualization of autonomy. Moves towards more autonomy must be analyzed in relation to their specific historical contexts and to other trends activated or reinforced at the same time. Autonomy and heteronomy can then be seen as variously intertwined and mutually relativizing aspects of historical patterns, rather than binary opposites. Projects of autonomy interact with, adapt to and are drawn into the dynamics of power structures; we have also noted the importance of relations with other cultures and ways of traditionalizing the past. Most importantly, the self-interpretive constitution of society is always interconnected with cultural articulations of the world, and changes to the self-interpretive patterns – including shifts which enhance the explicit self-instituting capacity of social forces – are linked to more or less radical modifications of world-constructing frameworks; but there is no *a priori* formula for the scope or direction of such transformations. Further theorizing of relations between paths to autonomy and perspectives on society's ultimate other – the world as a horizon of activities and interpretations – would have to begin with comparative analysis of different patterns. To grasp the specific motive forces, meaning and limits of the Greek opening to democracy, we therefore need to situate it within a broader historical context.

The Axial model aims at such a broadening of the analytical framework. But as we have seen, its main tenets are not easily applicable to the Greek experience. In very general terms, the structural transformations of the Archaic and Classical epochs were undeniably linked to equally radical cultural changes; a more detailed analysis must, however, lead to the conclusion that these two aspects of the breakthrough are not interrelated in the same way as in the supposedly standard Axial pattern. Early alterations to the Greek religious imaginary may – in conjunction with other factors – have opened up new horizons for the emerging *polis*, but they did not give rise to a normative framework for further structural change. Both the initial formation and the most radical later transformation of the *polis* had more to do with the internal dynamics of a very peculiar institutional pattern than with any impetus or challenge derived from a transcendent model of order. On the other hand, the absence of cultural aspirations to a more universal order (of the kind which Eisenstadt attributes to Axial traditions) helps to explain the unquestioned continuity of the *polis* as a paradigmatic form of social life. As for the new modes of thought which accompanied the history of the *polis*, they are perhaps best understood as responses to and extrapolations of institutional change, rather than prior redefinitions of cultural premises. Moreover, they did not crystallize into a dominant model of transcendental dimensions: philosophical thought replaced earlier ways of demarcating human and divine domains with more complex and abstract models, but the cosmological framework did not allow for sharp distinctions between higher and lower orders of reality. On the other hand, it was flexible enough to accommodate a philosophical culture markedly more pluralistic – and therefore less conducive to any kind of orthodoxy – than the intellectual traditions of other Axial cultures.

These tentative objections to both sides of the debate can be taken further and tied to a more specific point. The most salient theme of our discussion has been the central and formative role of political forces in Greek history. Neither of the two approaches in question does justice to this aspect of the problem. If the Greek experience is subsumed under a more general pattern – such as the Axial paradigm – and analyzed in terms of more or less complete fulfilment of the norm, the idea of a distinctive breakthrough due to particular events or achievements in the political domain can hardly be taken into consideration. Castoriadis' account of the *polis* and its development towards democracy brings us closer to the specifics of Greek history, but his concept of autonomy is too broadly defined to grasp the exceptional status, role and significance of the political sphere in Greek society. This emerges clearly from his discussion of power and its historical mutations. He identifies the political with the forms and functions of explicit power, and since the latter is omnipresent in human societies (the emergence of state structures only makes it more visible and centralized than it had previously been), the Greeks cannot be credited with inventing the political. What they did invent – according to Castoriadis – was politics in the sense of collective action based on explicit questioning of established institutions. The beginning of politics is, in other words, equated with the invention of autonomy.<sup>94</sup>

This way of distinguishing between the political as a component of all institutional frameworks and politics as a reflexive mode of institutionalization misses an essential point. Even if we accept that the political is a constitutive feature of human societies, the *polis* as such – well before its democratic transformation – represents a turning-point which cannot be identified with politics in the sense postulated by Castoriadis. The institutional deviation from the monarchic norm – apparently preceded by a prolonged de facto lapse of monarchic control – established a new form of the political: a multi-central, constitutively understructured and openly conflict-ridden field. It may be objected that tensions between rulers and elites (priestly, bureaucratic or military) were typical of the near Eastern monarchies. But the symbolic unity embodied in monarchic institutions barred this latent plurality from articulation. In that sense, the Greek refashioning of the political marked a new level of explicitness: the plural, multipolar and – to use the proper Greek word – agonizing character of power became fully visible. And inasmuch as the political sphere becomes – to an unprecedented degree – accessible to experience, reflection and interpretation, it seems appropriate to speak of a “discovery of the political”<sup>95</sup> which preceded the invention of autonomy.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Castoriadis (*supra* n. 5) 156–58.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Christian Meier (*supra* n. 60). The title of the English translation (Cambridge, MA 1990) is *The Greek Discovery of Politics*. The translation thus obscures the difference between discovery and emergence as well as between politics and the political. The view defended here – which owes much to Meier's work – combines the first part of the English title with the second part of the German.

Castoriadis tends to see the contrast between Greek and modern versions of autonomy as a double difference in degree: within its limits, the Greek version was more radical (it found expression in direct democracy), but it left a larger part of social life untouched (economic inequalities, patriarchal domination and unfree labour remained uncontested in practice and almost unquestioned in theory). But the above analysis suggests that these different ways of balancing breadth and depth are best understood in relation to different configurations of socio-cultural spheres. A structurally specific – and in all probability unique – position of the political domain in the overall context of social life was central to Greek history. The primacy of politics should, however, not be taken to mean a wholly self-contained development, unconditioned by socio-economic factors. Political conflicts and changes during the Archaic period were linked to socio-economic problems, and different solutions to the latter affected the political outcomes (Athens and Sparta are the obvious cases in point); although the redistribution of political power did not lead to any changes of corresponding magnitude in the socio-economic domain political counterweights to structural inequality were of some importance (in particular, contributions to collective projects of the *polis* could be demanded from wealthier citizens); and in the long run, the “citizen state” was – as the crisis of the fourth century was to show – vulnerable to polarizing trends at the socio-economic level. That said, the key aspect of the Greek experience was undoubtedly the autonomy of a unique political order, exceptionally detached from other patterns of social power and capable of developing along its own lines. This constellation would not have been viable without a corresponding primacy of the political at the level of collective identity and value-orientations.

The last point brings us back to the question of culture. More precisely, the introductory discussion of Castoriadis’ and Eisenstadt’s views singled out the interconnected order-maintaining and order-transforming roles of culture as prime themes for further discussion. The shift towards the political sphere does not invalidate this claim; it should rather be understood as a specification of the context to which the question should primarily be related. The primacy of politics presupposes a high level and a distinctive pattern of the cultural articulation of the political sphere. In this broad sense, Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s description of ancient Greece as “une civilisation de la parole politique”<sup>96</sup> seems particularly apposite. To stress this aspect is not to opt for cultural relativism. Cultural interpretations of power differ in regard to their sensitizing and thematizing potential; the interpretive framework that took shape in and through the Archaic *polis* was a particularly complex and innovative one. Power could be perceived as a field, shared and contested by multiple actors, but also open to appropriation and deliberative governance by a self-limiting collectivity of actors. Within this cultural horizon, the ambiguous attraction of tyranny could coexist with the

<sup>96</sup> P. Vidal-Naquet, “Une civilisation de la parole politique” in P. Vidal-Naquet, *Le chasseur noir* (Paris 1981) 21–35; in view of the untranslatable connotations of “parole”, I prefer to quote this formulation in the original.

fundamentally tragic vision of power that many later analysts have noted as a defining feature of the Greek tradition. Christian Meier distinguishes two phases of Greek political thought, a "nomistic" one marked by a focus on order and a "cratistic" one which tended to foreground power; the shift was, as he sees it, mainly due to the experiences of the fifth century. But although there is no doubt that the Persian Wars, the Athenian revolution and the Peloponnesian War opened up new perspectives on power, it is also true – even if we qualify Castoriadis's account of the breakthrough to autonomy in the ways indicated above – that the transition to democracy involved new ways of thinking about order. On the other hand, the Archaic experience of tyranny had already exemplified the problematic of power. It may thus be more appropriate to speak of a double focus on order and power, with changing emphases in response to historical experiences.

These considerations suggest lines of comparison with other Axial cultures; but further exploration of that field is beyond the scope of the present paper.

# Architectonics

Peter Murphy

## I

Hippodamos was the first utopian – the first person not actually taking part in the workings of a constitution to attempt some description of the ideal one.<sup>1</sup> That at least was Aristotle's reckoning – and we have no reason to doubt his judgment. Hailing from the port-city of Miletus,<sup>2</sup> Hippodamos was invited to provide an urban plan for Athens' port, Piraeus. He laid-out the entrepôt in the fashion of a grid. This design was not his invention. It had precedents amongst earlier Ionian Greek cities. Miletians had employed the grid-schema in their creation of colonial cities and in the rebuilding of Miletus after its sack by the Persians. What was revolutionary though, in Hippodamos' case, was to suppose that such a schema belonged to no place, to no where (*u-topia*) in particular – neither to Ionia nor to Attica. While the Persian conquest presented the Ionian Greeks with the necessity of systematically rebuilding broken cities, and while Ionian colonials took with them recreatable patterns of urbanity to new and distant places, Athens' acquisition-by-invitation of the grid-schema was unusual. It presumed to order space, providing a *eu-topia*, but without reference to a place-specific *Nomos*. It turned the Greek idea of *eu-topia* (the beautiful-good place) into the idea of *u-topia* (the no place).

Hippodamos' plan for Piraeus was a prototypical act of politics. It created order not by law or custom, still even less by "dictate" but via the *poiësis* of the city. This was an "order of things", and correspondingly politics was *the ordering of the city by the means of the city*. Whereas urban form had traditionally been a subordinate part of *nomos* (law) or quasi-divine direction, the Ionian city of Hippodamos' imagination relied on a kind of urban "rationalism" symbolized by mathematizing devices like the grid. This rationalism belonged to a broader process, initiated by the Ionians, that supposed the substitution of the "local" view of *Nomos* with the "world" view of proportional *Justice*. Hippodamos' grid, the most immediately recognizable aspect of his urban design, was applicable *anywhere* – as the Romans later discovered, and later still Jefferson who managed to get America laid out as a repeating grid (unmistakable from the air today). The transportable nature of this *u-topia* relied on a rational core, allowing Hippodamos' *u-topian* schema to be executed anywhere.

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 1267b22–30.

<sup>2</sup> Today, landlocked and some distance from the sea.

U-topia was the answer to a practical question. Like a number of other Ionian cities, Miletus engaged in adventurous sea faring, trading and maritime colonization, especially around the Black Sea. Such colonization posed a question of rational organization. When colonials founded a new city, how were they to layout their city? What schema of foundation could they use? What schema travels easily, across distances, and adapts to *any* local topos? In the answer to this question lay the origins of u-topia.

While the Ionians conceived a worldview of transportable reason, the full political flowering of this reason had to await the Attic reception of the Ionian idea. Until Hippodamos came to Piraeus, utopia remained *in nuce*. Until this moment, the grid-style urban plan of various Ionian cities could still be confused with a kind of nomos. Only when it crossed the Aegean to Attica did its u-topian character become fully manifest. In turn, such a crossing was possible only because of the Hellenic institution of *xeniteia*. When Hippodamos and others like him came to Athens, they did so as guest-friends – citizens or inhabitants of other cities who did not share the nomos of Attica. These xenetics were welcome in foreign cities under the protection of the panhellenic institution of guest-friendship. Just as importantly their sense of an “ideal constitution” (a *kallipolis*), separable from both the nomos of Attica and the nomos of their home city alike, made them comfortable as residents dwelling in alien cities. They were, arguably, the first people *who traveled for the pleasure of living elsewhere*. Possessed of an intuitive image of a universal city (*kosmopolis*), these xenetics could enter and leave different cities, with different laws and customs (*nomoi*), with a certain ease.

What is this “constitution” that both orders a city and yet is not a nomos? What *kind* of constitution is it that structures without laws? Hippodamos was clear on this score: *it is a constitution of numbers*. When he crossed the Aegean, he brought with him to Attica the image of an ideal city based on triadic relationships. That is to say, a city based not on nomos but on an ideal mathematical-social arrangement of three classes, three corresponding divisions of land, and three categories of law. “Hippodamos planned a state with a population of 10000, divided into three parts, one of skilled workers, one of farmers, and a third to bear arms and secure defense. The territory also was to be divided into three parts, a sacred, a public, and a private; the worship of the gods would be maintained out of the produce of sacred land; the defenders out of the common land, and the private land would belong to the farmers.”<sup>3</sup> While Hippodamos’ city had laws, these laws were arranged according to a triadic structure – like other key aspects of the ideal city. In the u-topian city, there were three kinds of law: the law of hubris, damage, and homicide. This was as if to remind us that, in the ideal constitution, the law was a subordinate part of the metrical structure of the city.

The Hippodamian “planned” city rested not on nomos but on a set of mathematical relations whose sum the Ionian Greeks had dubbed “justice”. This was the justice of a marine, diasporic civilization with an exceptional interest in

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle (*supra* n. 1) 1267b30 – 1267b37.

scientific speculation. This was also a justice that did not reach the full heights of "utopia" until, under the auspices of the ethos of the guest-friend (*xenos*), it encountered Attic Greeks who were prepared – albeit only up to a certain point – to welcome the "ideal constitution" of the Ionian stranger. The ambiguity of the Attic Greeks, torn between the xenetic and the nomotic, is well illustrated by Plato. In his Republic (*Politeia*), dating from the immediate postPeriklean era, Plato repeatedly invokes a Hippodamos-like triadic schema to explain the constitution of an ideal city, his republic, which equated no particular or extant city. Much later in his life, a disillusioned Plato retreated from the Hippodamian legacy, conjuring in its place another kind of utopia – a nomic utopia, in which the ideal city was constituted from *nomoi* (laws) that were the product of the philosophers' imagination. Plato was well aware of the problems that his city of laws posed. This imaginary city (located in Crete) was to accept emigrants from all over Greece ("... I imagine settlers from the Peloponnese will be particularly welcome.")<sup>4</sup> Yet such diversity of origins made it very difficult to constitute the ideal city on the basis of a fundamental law. If it was a single people from a single territory settling down to form a colony, Plato acknowledged, things would have been much easier. "When a single people speaks the same language and observes the same laws you get a certain feeling of community, because everyone shares the same religious rites and so forth..."<sup>5</sup> But in the case of the xenopolis, where backgrounds are radically different, settlers do not find it easy "to accept law or political systems that differ from their own". Having made that very realistic assessment, Plato turned to the idea of the legislator – a lawgiver like Lycurgus or Solon – to overcome these difficulties. The authority of the lawgiver, supplemented by the office of a "dictator", promised to make possible what seemed impossible: the creation of a city of strangers based on law.

Plato's faith in the lawgiver, however, is quite dubious – at least for a city composed of settlers from far-flung parts. The primary tie amongst strangers cannot be law. Law always has an *idio*-syncratic aspect – it joins together in a specific, not universal, manner. If not *nomos*, then what basis is there for the city of strangers? Already well before Plato's time, in the period between the 8th and 6th centuries BC, the marine cities of the Ionians discovered, by force of circumstance, that *nomos* was not the most useful "foundation" for new cities. The Ionian metropolises were avid colonizers.<sup>6</sup> Miletus alone created somewhere between 75 and 90 cities. Colonization created a world of strangers. Sometimes this was because the Ionian colonial cities drew on settlers from more than one metropolitan city; more routinely it was because colonial *nomos* was necessarily an adumbration of the conventions, family and "tribal" customs, and laws of the metropolitan city. *Nomos* could not be brought to bear with full force in the displaced circumstances of colonial life. Corresponding to this practical exigen-

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Laws* Book 4, 707–708.

<sup>5</sup> Plato (*supra* n. 4) Book 4, 708–709.

<sup>6</sup> For accounts of the colonization process, see A.J. Graham, *Colony and Mother City in Ancient Greece* (Manchester 1964); Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece* (London 1993) chapter 7; Michael Grant, *The Founders of the Western World* (New York 1991) chapter 3.



cy. Ionian thought identified *phusis* (the structure of the *kosmos*) as the alternative to *nomos*. *Phusis* was not another kind of law. It was not "natural law", but rather "the shape of things", the geometry of the universe. In the simple, regular rectangles of Milesian city planning was to be found a practical analogue of *phusis*. In such a place, strangers could coexist in a legible and ordered manner without sharing the same horizon of customs or laws. These strangers were the practitioners of the art (*technē*) of the making (*poiēsis*) of a universe (*kosmos*) in which all could dwell. Their first act – in a "new place" (neo-topia) or in an "other place" (hetero-topia) – was not to declare a law, but to lay the foundations of a city structure: to put up frames, mark out roads, create spaces for public assembly.

In the colonies, the Ionians experimented with a new (geometricizing) basis for human society. The colonists who sailed to new locations did so not just in the name of land or livelihood, but "equality" – the geometrical "equality" of *isonomia*. (Plots in colonial cities were distributed to first settlers by lot.) The orthogonal grids, parallel streets, rectilinear plots, and clear separation of private, public and religious lands, (all of these absent in the metropolises), indicated a new kind of social arrangement – one with isometric qualities. It was as if society could be formed out of the "building blocks" of three equal axes at right angles to each other. It was not the speech act (the dictate, the resolution, the judgment) that defined the order of the polis but the making (building, framing, laying out) of the city. It was not the *ties of nomos* that the Ionian *phusikoi* sought but the *relationship of things*. Where "things" were well-arranged (in a *kosmos*), a just order which embraced strangers was possible. Arrangement was not merely a placement of existing things but also the creation, by shaping or forming, of things. Through multiple acts of reification, and the arrangement of these artifices, the city came into being. The silent patterns of the city – like a container that was regularly filled with the hum and bustle of human activity – provided the "order of things" that defined the conduct, interactions, and horizons of the polis dweller.

## II

Far removed from the *topos* (landscape) of home, and without the inclination or possibility of returning home, or recreating home elsewhere, the stranger is driven by the power of necessity: *the need to create a worldly order of things*. Those who experience *xeniteia* – who sojourn amongst strangers – have to create a world for themselves. Instead of moving in a *topos* that is already defined in advance by *nomos*, those who journey amongst strangers must acquire the "know-how" of *kosmopoiēsis*. The person who is characterized by the experience of successful *xeniteia* has a constructive ability. The persons who leave their birthplace and come to live amongst strangers do so because the claustrophobic nature of their customary life conflicts with their sense of world-exploration, or else because hardships caused by war, economic collapse, and social discrimination impel them to leave home. In either case, the promise of living amongst strangers

strangers is the chance to participate in the creation of a "shining city" (*heliopolis*). Great cities (*megapoleis*) have always drawn the curious and the harassed – and not simply to "rebuild their lives", but also to participate in the making of something that will outlive them. The curious sojourner harbors the desire to create something special, while the escapee from misfortune responds to the destructive contingencies of life with the attitude that what has been destroyed can be built elsewhere. This latter outlook is epitomized by the counsel which the Attic general Nikias gave his troops in the midst of battle. Nikias advised his troops: "Consider that you constitute a polis the moment you settle down wherever you are."<sup>7</sup> Implicit in this advice was the belief that no matter what the effect of invasion, dispossession or displacement, it is also possible to *make a world in some other place*.

This world – the "made-world" – is the world of the city. Indeed, one might say: the "being" of the xenetic is the city. "*Wherever you settle, you are a polis.*" Those who experience successful *xeniteia* know how to make the world of the city. Such a world, simply by virtue of the fact that it can be (re)created in all sorts of locales, has a *universal* significance. The "city world" is not bound to a particular place or a particular people who belong to a particular place. The "city world" is a "world city". The "world city" appears rather late in the history of urbanism. It is a special creation. *It is a creation capable of being recreated*. Most "urban" societies in history have not possessed such a reiteratable character. Their destruction was their end. One of the most telling examples of this finality was the case of the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan, for whom the appearance of a handful of Spanish conquistadors was the end of their society. This society did not have a universal character. It was not "a world". In contrast, the Spanish colonizers built cities that absorbed the Indian and mestizos descendants of those they conquered, while the reverse – an Aztec absorption of the invaders – was never imagined. Indeed the very appearance of the invader was overwhelmingly demoralizing.<sup>8</sup> The Spanish had the history of the universal city on their side.<sup>9</sup>

The history of the universal city stretches back, at the very least, to the Athenians of the Periklean age who encouraged guest workers (*metics*) to take up residence in Athens (not least of all among them, Hippodamos). However, while

<sup>7</sup> This is a translation by Jacob Burckhardt – *History of Greek Culture* (New York 1963) 95 – of a line from a speech by Nikias as represented in Thucydides, *History* 7.77.

<sup>8</sup> "Why did Moctezuma give up? Why was he so fascinated by the Spaniards that he experienced a vertigo which it is no exaggeration to call sacred – the lucid vertigo of the suicide on the brink of the abyss? The gods had abandoned him... The arrival of the Spanish was interpreted by Moctezuma, at least at the beginning, not so much as a threat from the outside than as the internal conclusion of one cosmic period and the commencement of another." Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings* (New York 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Even to the point where the image makers of the imperial city of Mexico could equate the city-state of Tenochtitlan with Rome – a "pagan" predecessor of a universal Christian Empire. The implication – never spelt out because the Empire of Spain was Catholic not Orthodox – was that Mexico City was the Constantinople of New Spain. On the comparison of Tenochtitlan with Rome, see Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana: Her Life and Her World* (London 1988) 14, 36, 39.

Athenians identified with the great (Ionian) journeying epic of Homer, and all that implied by way of the panhellenic ethos of guest-friendship, they also imagined themselves to be the aboriginal inhabitants of Attica. Thus Athenians were often in the mood to jealously guard their citizenship, and swung between the poles of chauvinism and cosmopolitanism. This ambivalence was repeated through the larger Hellenic world. Sparta was xenophobic while cities like Korinth (from what we know of the historical record) were remarkably hospitable towards strangers. In the Greek world lay the (uneasy) beginning of the tradition of the universal city, which was to reappear in many guises through time. In different ways, with different stresses, and always with ambivalence, the universal city was recreated again and again. The Hellenistic Empire, the late Roman republic, the Empire created by Augustus, the Byzantine Empire, the Augustinian cosmos of medieval European Christianity, the Ottoman Empire: all had their universal cities. Most notably, Rome, Alexandria, Constantinople. And all of them owed something, albeit different things, to the Greek example of *kosmo political poetics* and to the know-how involved in the making of the world of the city. All of them owed something to *architectonics*.

### III

When we think about modernity, and want to identify equivalents of the historic cosmopolises in the modern era, London, Paris and New York stand out as candidates. Yet all of these are metropolises rather than cosmopolises. Fascinating certainly, but each lacking crucial dimensions to be found in the historic cosmopolises. Indeed it is evident that somewhere in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, the capacity for "world city making" declined. The modern conditions that paralyzed the cosmopolis are typified in the case of London in its imperial hey-day. The faux Roman aspects of the British Empire gave London a quasi-cosmopolitan quality; at the same time the insular disdain of the English for colonials stymied the full flowering of this. Writers, artists, politicians, visitors from across the world – sharing a common imperial language – were drawn to London in large numbers. But the anomaly of empire in the age of nations made this state of affairs unsustainable. Similarly, when British hegemony was eclipsed by American power in the mid 20th century, there emerged little to compare with the great cosmopolises of the past. Even a city like New York, which managed both energetic brilliance and cultural concentration, conspicuously lacked the political dimension that (otherwise) might have made it the definitive city of "the American century".

While edifices such as the Rockefeller Center (1931–1940) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1895)<sup>10</sup> mirrored a remarkable commercial and artistic *kenësis* – a wild electric beauty, as the poet Elizabeth Hardwick described it<sup>11</sup> –

<sup>10</sup> Richard Morris was the architect.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Hardwick, "Boston: The Last Ideal" in Maureen Howard (ed.), *Contemporary American Essays* (New York 1985).

there was to be found in New York City no equivalent of the "collective works" of the historic cosmopolises. There was nothing like the agora of Athens or the forum of Rome; or indeed anything like the Hagia Sophia of Byzantine Constantinople – nothing that could be described as a "great public work". The closest that New York came to "public genius" was the work of engineers – the builders of the Brooklyn Bridge (1883), or, more notoriously, the parkways of Robert Moses.<sup>12</sup> The "politics" of New York was cursed by an undertow of patrimonialism. This migrant city never fully escaped the favor-trading of ethnic neighborhoods. There was no public superstructure that effectively over-determined its communal base. Ironically, the city gave a home to the foremost council philosopher of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt,<sup>13</sup> but its spirit was best summed-up not by an immigrant daughter but by a native son, Michael Walzer, who, astonishingly, late in the 20th century, could still find a philosophical defense for political patronage.<sup>14</sup> In the New York of Walzer, there was nothing that stood in between the insolence of office and the system of spoils. All twentieth century cities – even the most distinguished, metropolises rather than cosmopolises – have struggled under the weight of being governed either by the patrimony of bosses or by the proceduralism of office, or by an admixture of both. What might be described as "civic glory" persistently eluded both city "fathers" and city "managers".

There is no doubt that metropolises have persisted in attempts to lay claim to civic greatness. That there has been little effective sense of how such a thing might actually be achieved is also evident. There is no unhappier case of this than modern Athens. Its daily life is conducted in the shadow of its ancient past, a continual, and irritating, reminder of "what once was". In the nineteenth century, Athenians had hoped to recapture something of that lost civic greatness. By the end of the 20th century, by general consensus, what had been created was a "jerry-rigged" modern metropolis. How can we account for such a failure? Was it the "catastrophic events" of 1922? In that year the disintegration of the historic Ottoman empire, and its fragmentation into nation states, culminated in a show-down between Greece and Turkey, both of whom had set upon a course of redefining their states and their territories as national rather than civic or imperial. Greece's military defeat by Turkey, and the huge influx of Greek refugees from Asia Minor into Athens, was a defining moment in 20th century Greek life. The size of the refugee flood, the poverty of refugees, their (*Rumeliot*) culture: were these unmanageable for a city? Not necessarily – if we compare this with Ottoman Constantinople's long enduring role as a "refuge of the world", or Ottoman Salonika's absorption of tens of thousands of Jewish exiles in 1492, or even the record of a modern immigrant city like New York. Perhaps, then, the explanation is political. The "irregular" nature of Greek governance in the 20th

<sup>12</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (London 1983); Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York 1974).

<sup>13</sup> See, especially, her *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth 1963).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (Oxford 1983) 162–163.

century quite possibly made a decisive contribution to the failures of modern Athenian urbanism. The dictatorships of Metaxas and of the Colonels, and the protean populism of the Papandreou years<sup>15</sup> – all utilized patrimonial techniques of rule that made personal contacts more important than the rule of law. But even a “regular” state could not have guaranteed the flourishing of a *megapolis*. The lesson of the 20th century is that the most procedural of states, like the United States, can only produce a Los Angeles, not a Florence, while the Florentines in their hey-day lived with the “irregularity” of the Medicis, and still created a city of great durability and distinction.

So what then is essential to the making of the *megapolis*? One requirement is for there to be present some type of “universal authority”. *Universal authority is neither procedural nor patrimonial*. Historically it has appeared in three guises: the world-religious, the historical-imperial, and the counciliar. A city like Florence rose to prominence under the provenance of counciliar authority (or as it often was in practice: the myth of counciliar authority). Constantinople combined the world-religious and the historical-imperial. In the case of Rome, all three variants of universal authority were (at various times) mobilized. Universal authority insinuates a connection with the *kosmos*. Its system of governance has an emphatic relationship with the external world. This can take many forms. It might be the readiness of ancient Greek cities to found colonies in distant parts; or the manner in which Rome granted citizenship to provincials; or the Ottoman self-image of Constantinople as a “refuge of the world”; or the Florentine gift for doing international banking and diplomacy; or Venice’s relationship with Byzantium, etc. In every case, authority is outward-looking. Its members travel to foreign places; the city accepts foreigners under its protection. It is an *authority that is world-seeking*.

What do foreigners bring to the world city? Not simply skills in the narrow sense, but a capacity – that can be realized under certain conditions – for world-making. Of course this is not always the case. Many times over, when people migrate or disperse, they bring with them their “culture” (customs, attitudes, concrete norms and rules, rituals) that they do their best to transplant to other soils. The promise is that culture – that which can be cultivated – can be “grown again” in different climates, even if in practice customs tend to radically alter in “new environments”. In contrast, the xenetic, “the one who journeys amongst strangers”, does not bring customs along for the journey but rather a world-making capacity – a cosmopolitical technique. The person who comes to a new place (a foreign place) with a “culture” brings something that has an aura of permanence – of being handed down from generation to generation. (Even if, as is often the case, a custom is of recent origin, it will still be understood in this way.) In contrast, the person who is a world-maker *creates* something that is enduring. Where the enduring thing created is “great”, it will become “immortal” or “monumental”: the kind of objectivation that constitutes the *megapolis*. The

<sup>15</sup> These regimes lasted, respectively: 1936–1941 (Metaxas), 1967–1974 (the military junta) and 1981–1990, 1993–1997 (Papandreou).

products of such *kosmopoïēsis* are not specific in their meaning to one culture or ethnos, nor are they the cumulative products of several coexisting cultures. Rather they have a universal significance. The world is a thing (and often, quite literally, a material thing) that stands apart from, and above, cultures. *The world is the artefact not of culture but of civilization.*

## IV

*Kosmopoïēsis* is only possible where there is *xeniteia*. *Xeniteia* is not the condition of being a stranger but of journeying amongst strangers. It may be that the person who engages in this kind of journey will be looked-upon as a stranger. But *kosmopoïēsis* only occurs where *those whom the sojourner encounters are strangers to themselves*. In the village, everybody is familiar to each other; the stranger stands alone, apart from this familiarity. In the world-city, strangers are commonplace. Everyone is, in some aspect, a stranger to each other.

No city of the 19th or 20th century qualifies fully as a *megapolis* – not even Paris, “the capital of the 19th century”. It is true, of course, that Napoleon made Paris a show-piece for his collection of world-memorabilia. He rebuilt the Louvre to house the art treasures stolen in his foreign campaigns. Yet while French scholarship became renowned for its orientalism, archeology, Hellenism and so forth, imperial Paris of the 19th century was no “refuge of the world”; its diplomacy and commerce were not polylingual; its metropolitan administrative system remained closed to colonials. Even the remarkable councilial experiment of the Paris Commune (1870) did not depart fundamentally from this. In practice it exhibited little of the internationalism beloved by its most famous defender, Karl Marx. The Commune, while municipal rather than monarchic, civic rather than national in its idea of governance, visibly lacked a world-dimension or world-orientation. Indeed, it was born out of a sense of national humiliation and popular reluctance to accept the terms of France’s defeat in war with Germany. Despite Marx’s pointed assertion that “loudly proclaiming its international tendencies – because the cause of the producer is everywhere the same and its enemy everywhere the same, whatever its nationality... – it proclaimed as a principle the admission of foreigners into the Commune, it even chose a foreign workman (a member of the International) onto its executive, it decreed [the destruction of] the symbol of French chauvinism – the Vendôme column!”<sup>16</sup> – 19th century Paris remained determinedly metropolitan rather than cosmopolitan: a fact that eventually was to bear bitter fruit in the form of the anger of colonials towards French rule.<sup>17</sup>

The colonial remained “the outsider” in Paris. A Roman might sometimes laugh at the coarseness of the manners and accents of provincials, but being from

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, “First Draft of The Civil War in France” in David Fernbach (ed.), *The First International and After* (Harmondsworth 1974) 264.

<sup>17</sup> This was so, ironically enough, of both settlers and subject populations in the colonies.

distant parts of the Empire was not an obstacle to rising to highest office in ancient Rome. In contrast, the national Empires of the 19th century found it difficult to assimilate persons from the margins into the center. The City (Paris) was no longer a microcosm of the Empire as whole, as Rome or Constantinople had been. Rather it was first and foremost *the capital city of a nation*. And for that reason Rome, which had remained a preeminent model of empire building until the end of 18th century, dramatically fell out of favor. In its place arose a fascination with Hellenism. Hellenism was drawn into service as an ideology of national empire. Mainly what constituted this "Hellenism" was a thin slice of the Hellenic past – the classical 5th century and the "primitive religion" of the pre-Christian Greeks. Images of a "Greek revival" offered the possibility of reclaiming something of the aura of universal authority associated with antiquity without having to bow to the image of world-citizenship that was inextricably linked to the Romans. Of course, this meant largely ignoring the pan-Hellenism of Olympia, Delphi and Kos, not to mention the cosmopolitanism of the Hellenistic age, or the debt of Rome's world-conception to the stoics and epicureans, or the Roman-identifying Hellenism of Byzantium. Hellas proved more attractive to the spirit of the European 19th century than did Rome because Rome necessarily implied a political universalism at odds with nationalism. If the idea of being "Roman" meant that an African provincial could hold influential offices in Rome without any question, then by analogy it would have been legitimate for an Algerian to hold an office in the upper echelons of the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères – something in fact inconceivable to the "national mind".

19th century Europeans refused to give up the antique model. Even if political universalism was not to their taste, they were still attracted to a notion of *cultural universalism*. They felt that a national language like French was a world language ("the language of diplomacy" etc.) and that national art had a global significance. The obverse of this was the creation of national institutions (museums) into which the art of world was gathered. Classical Greece proved a convenient symbol of such "national universalism". Classical Hellas had been a universal intellectual power that involved no universal officeholding of a Roman kind. Reassuringly for nationalists, even prominent metics like Aristotle in classical Athens had been precluded from Athenian citizenship.

"Cultural Hellenism" proved to be a paradoxical model of universalism but one therefore well-suited to the age of the nation state. "The Greek revival" appeared as a chapter in many of the stories of nation-building in the 19th century, but none more ironically than in the case of modern Greece. The first act of cultural legitimization of Greek national power was the decision to rebuild Athens – which long ago had become nothing more than a dusty village and a site of ruins – as the national capital of modern Greece. This attempt to harness the cultural glories of the classical era was augmented when Greek governments of the 19th century decided to recreate Athens along "neoclassical" lines. In pursuit of this goal, the services of a number of foreign architects, including notably (Hans) Christian Hansen, were employed.

Christian Hansen was a classic peripatetic. A traveling scholarship – which he had won (in 1829) for his student work at the Copenhagen Royal Academy of Art – took him to Rome, Dresden, Munich, Berlin, and ultimately to Greece (in 1833). He left Denmark for what was expected to be a short study trip. But it was to be 26 years – during which time he worked extensively in Athens and then later in Trieste (1850) – before he returned to Denmark (1857). Hansen designed a number of major Neo Classical buildings in Athens during his prolonged stay there. Among them: the Mint (1834–36), the Civil Hospital (1836–42), the University (1836–64), the Anglican Church (1841), and the Ophthalmos (1847–54). Yet his work failed to create any true civic monuments – viz., buildings that define the character of a city. There is no doubting the competence, the scholarship, even the elegance of his work. Yet it was not the work of *kosmopoiesis*. This was not an individual failing. The problem was a collective one.

Put in its most simple terms: 19th century Athens was not a milieu of strangers. The “nation-building” project predefined the city as part of a homeland, and a homeland is a milieu of those who are “familiar” not “strangers”. Familiar in the sense of sharing an *ethnos* – a set of “customs and attitudes” framed by a common origin and distilled in the ideology of “the genealogy of the nation”, in national institutions and law. The Greek “national home” like any other of course was an artifice – a sometimes ruthless compounding of regional “customs and attitudes” (of the Peloponnese, Asia Minor, Crete, etc.) that had marked the centrifugal dispersal of the Greeks in a long history that reaches back to Ionian times. Yet it was an artifice that denied an artificing (Hephaistosian) nature in favor of a genealogical one.

In the milieu of strangers, the brilliant monuments and special places of the *megapolis* create a common bond between strangers in lieu of shared “customs and attitudes”. The material artifice of the city – together with the ethical bond of friendship – is the chief connection between those who are not instantly recognizable to each other through the medium of their gestures and habits. Without the special conditions of the milieu of strangers, an architect is not in a position to produce work that is definitive of a great city. That is, without the society of strangers the architect can not produce “the architecture of the city”.<sup>18</sup> For the architect is not obliged – “forced” in some sense – to bracket the “genealogical statement-making” of national architecture for a general ordering: a summa that is capable of re-presenting all of the forces of city life.

The nation – as the term “nation-building” suggests – is indeed constructed. But, unlike the polis, which revels in its Hephaistosian nature, the nation denies its “made” character in favor of a genealogical account of itself. In the nineteenth century, such genealogy took the form of “historicism” – the search for the origins of nations in the historical past. When the new Greek state (the kingdom

<sup>18</sup> “The city... is to understood here as architecture. By architecture I mean not only the visible image of the city and the sum of its different architectures, but architecture as construction, the construction of the city over time.” Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, MA 1982) 21.



of Greece) located its own genesis in the classical past, it was far from unique in this. Many other fledgling nations, or national movements, of the 19th century invoked a classical lineage. In the newly-conceived national world that Christian Hansen grew up in, progressive Danes dreamed of making Copenhagen into a new Athens. Each of the new nation states – as they began to emerge in the nineteenth century out of the ruins of empires or the concatenation of principalities – was faced with the question of legitimacy. Dynasty (e.g. being Bourbon) no longer furnished legitimacy. Nor did the Roman antecedents of empires (e.g. the Holy Roman Empire). Nations were defined as territorial-linguistic entities, not “households” or “empires”. What could possibly legitimate a territorial-linguistic entity?

One answer to this question was *aesthetic genius*. “From this soil-language grows artistic genius.” A telling example of such aesthetic legitimation was the scheme of Crown Prince (later King) Ludwig I of Bavaria – one of a new breed of quasi-national kingdoms of the 19th century – to build a pantheon of German geniuses. (Ludwig got the idea from the French Pantheon.) In this national “temple” was to be housed busts of Schiller, Goethe, Leibniz, Mengs, Gluck, Mozart, etc. Ludwig had wanted to call his building the Pantheon, but was convinced (by the historian Johannes von Müller) that it should carry a German name. Hence it was named Walhalla. For all of this Germania, though, Ludwig insisted that the building be designed as a Grecian temple. Many advisors – not least of all his architect Leo von Klenze<sup>19</sup> – tried to talk him out of this strategy. It was doubted that a Grecian building was suitable for representing German cultural glory. Ludwig insisted it was – and prevailed – so Klenze designed a Doric temple for Ludwig’s German Elysium.

Ludwig’s stand was not simply a matter of truculent idiosyncrasy. For if the “artistic gods” of the dawning age of nationalism had to be housed, what better “house of the gods” than a Greek temple? The difficulty, though, was that such a symbolic equation was not self-evident in the case of a national monument. Even Friedrich Schinkel, who created some of the greatest Neo Classical architecture of the 19th century, tried to change Ludwig’s mind with drawings of a Gothic edifice. But Ludwig remained unpersuaded – perhaps because he was never completely reconciled to the idea of national monarchy. After all, his son (Otto) was to become the first king of Greece (1832–1862) making this a royal house not limited by nationality. Yet it was also not a monarchy that could survive by invoking its dynastic authority (the glories of lineage). Neither was it a monarchy with “Holy Roman” imperial ambitions (i.e. to rule Greece as part of, say, a “Greater Bavarian Empire” or something of that kind). In this circumstance “Hellas” offered an image of plausible royalist transnationality in an age when most symbolic figures of transnationality were under siege. Notably, when Otto was forced from office in Greece in 1862, the same archetype of transnational-

<sup>19</sup> Hansen met Klenze during the former’s student-prize tour of European cities. Klenze was later to trump Hansen when Klenze’s town plan for Athens (1834) was preferred to Hansen’s. The Klenze plan, though, was never executed.

lity was continued – this time with a Dane, George I, installed on the Greek throne.

If the idea of “Hellas” was a bridge between national monarchies that seemed to transcend national particularity, it was also at the same time a validation of nationhood. What the debate about the Pantheon-Walhalla signified was that History had emerged as a source of legitimacy for the nation-state. This History was both similar to and different from older dynastic and imperial narratives. Similar in the sense that History provided a *genealogical validation* of the state. Different in that historical genealogy proved remarkably plastic, pluralistic, even indiscriminate in its applications. Thus the Prince could insist on the “classical” while the Architect could argue the case for the “gothic”. Each was in fact simply *one contingent thread* of the past that could be drawn on in weaving the fabric of the nation. Princes and their Architects plundered from a tremendous variety of (historical) sources. Doric Greece, Carolingian Romanesque, Italian Renaissance, Flemish Gothic, Elizabethan Tudor, etc. There was no consistency of approach. The nation drew its validation from its relation to many different historical sources. This had the cumulative effect of creating a built environment that referred to no past in particular. This eclectic past represented a kind of indefinite time. *By making the past indefinite, the nation was freed from its hold.* All “nation-building” asserted itself against a recent past – of European dynasties, Empires, feudalism, and the like. Combinations of gothic, doric, renaissance, romanesque, etc., liberated the nation from a relationship with any one specific history. *Historicism contained within itself the end of history.*

The plasticity of such national legitimization was paralleled by the plasticity of the architect’s own allegiances. The great Neo Classical architects of the 19th century distinguished themselves with a facility for gothic and other styles.<sup>20</sup> In this way, architectural *form* became reduced to *style*. Christian Hansen was no exception. His early work in the Classical style gave over increasingly to interpretations of Byzantine architecture – echoing a revival of interest in the Byzantine period amongst cultural elites in the Greek Kingdom. What is most remarkable about this is that the modern nation was unable to represent itself in any consistent form. In a way, *style, and stylistic change, became the ersatz “form” of the nation.* The use of classical *styles* in the 19th century had little connection with the *phusis* of the classical. Style was a set of *conventions (nomoi)*, even if they were established with scholarly rigor.<sup>21</sup> When the classical was reduced to a set of stylized signs and conventions, its meaning was lost.

<sup>20</sup> For example – Christian Hansen ended his career doing restorations of medieval ecclesiastical buildings. Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841) combined classical and gothic design, as did Sir Charles Barry (1795–1860). Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944) worked in Tudor and Queen Anne genres, as well as in classical forms. Bernard Maybeck (1862–1957) combined a Beaux-Arts classicism with various romantic stylings (Tudoresque, Baronial, Arts and Crafts, etc.).

<sup>21</sup> Following a lineage of scholarly architectural classicism that began with Stuart and Revett’s *The Antiquities of Athens* (2 vols, 1762 & 1787), Hansen was involved in the excavation of the Temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis with Ludwig Ross and Eduard Schaubert. The survey of their work was published as *Die Akropolis von Athen* (1839).

## V

Before its reduction to a style, classical form had been the visible representation of the structure of the City. It depicted an equilibrium of forces in both the material structure of a building and the social structure of the City. The political constitution of the City was a kind of artful building in which the forces of the human kosmos were marshaled and ordered. The composition of the building was the material representation of the architectonic ordering of swelling energies and clashing forces of the universal City.

In the modern age, the image of "nation-building" has often been invoked. But in practice the denizens of nations are less interested in how a nation is "built" than in the question of "where do we come from". They are more concerned with the question of "who are we" than "how are we structured". Ultimately, the answer to the question of "who are we" is opaque. The question cannot be answered unambiguously. A nation like modern Greece could give a dazzling array of antinomical responses to the question, pointing variously to classical, Hellenistic, Byzantine, diasporic, paeleo-Helladic histories, without even pausing for breath. The opacity of such answers only seems to fuel preoccupation with the question. Indeed the question (of origins) ends up being much more important than any of the answers. The question overdetermines each answer. We can see this at work very clearly in the imagination of 19th century classicism. One of the perversities of 19th century appropriations of the classical is that they transformed the classical from a discourse on "structure" to a discourse on "origins". What the Neo Classical architect sought was a mimesis of some ideal origin rather than the making of a material structure. This was fundamentally in contradiction to the spirit animating the classical. While the Neo Classical architect proved to be a master of classical detail, the essential point of the classical enterprise was lost.

Buildings are built to stand up rather than fall down. Classical architecture begins with that intuition. In a built structure, if it is not to collapse, every force must be balanced and reacted by another equal and opposite force at every point throughout the structure.<sup>22</sup> On this premise, the technique of building and the science of structures rests. *Classical architecture is an artful representation of the balance of material forces.* The first architects, like the vernacular builders who preceded them, had to make structures that did not fall down. But they went beyond the vernacular builder by graphically representing the equilibrium of forces in the appearance of the building. For instance – *showing* the transmission of compressive load from lintels to the heads of columns by the "swelling" of the capitals (or "echinoi").<sup>23</sup> What the art (*technē*) of architecture provided was a way of *outwardly representing the inward clash of (physical) forces* of a structure.

<sup>22</sup> J.E. Gordon, *Structures* (Harmondsworth 1978) 34.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon (*supra* n. 22) 370.

Vernacular builders worked out ingenious structural solutions (like the gable) to practical problems. At the point where architecture emerges, structure acquires a symbolic and philosophical resonance.<sup>24</sup> *Classical architecture is a mimesis of construction.* The architect creates a tectonic order – both a building that is well-structured (that does not fall down) and an artistic representation of the load and strength, stress and strain that is embodied in the *phusis* of a structure. “[The] experience of loadbearing is represented by the entasis of the column; the chief beam binding the columns together and imposing on them a common load becomes the architrave; the syncopation of the transversal beams resting on the architrave is represented by the triglyphs and metopes of the frieze... the projecting rafters of the roof supported by the frieze appear in the shape of the cornice; similarly the mutules, dentils, guttae, echinus, abacus, volutes... are images that imitate their respective constructional models.”<sup>25</sup>

In classical architectural composition, however, it is not merely structure that is represented but *a certain type of structure*, viz. one that is well-formed, that displays *a subtle and powerful order*. The classical architect must represent not only structure but structure that has solved the problem of bringing a welter of competing forces into equilibrium. To achieve this, the architect arranges things symmetrically, rhythmically, proportionally – and structures these arrangements tripartitally. Classical structure has a beginning, middle, end.<sup>26</sup> More particularly:

- a. The system of load and support is represented by recurring tripartite subdivisions. First, there is the tripartite combination of entablature, column and stylobate (or else pedestal). These are further tripartitally subdivided. The entablature into cornice, frieze and architrave; the column into capital, shaft and base; pedestal into cornice, dado and base. Likewise, the stylobate normally has three steps.<sup>27</sup>
- b. The tripartite schema is also achieved by the employment of symmetry – for example, identical rooms on either side of a passageway, or columns equidistant from the centerpoint of an entranceway.
- c. Finally, proportionality (“the equality of ratios”) is a powerful device for finding the “right” relationship between three unequal dimensions. Whether it be an arithmetic, harmonic, geometric (or other) kind, proportionality is perfectly attuned to the three-dimensionality of built structure, and, by inference, to the multi-dimensionality of social structure.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Demetri Porphyrios, “The Relevance of Classical Architecture” in Andreas Papadakis and Harriet Watson (eds.), *New Classicism* (London 1990) 56.

<sup>25</sup> Porphyrios (*supra* n. 24) 56.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* VII.35.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, *Classical Architecture: The Poetics of Order* (Cambridge, MA 1986) 53.

<sup>28</sup> The two modern thinkers who most clearly grasped the social implications of proportionality were Cornelius Castoriadis and Simone Weil. See Castoriadis, “Value, Equality, Justice, Politics” in *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (Cambridge, MA 1984) and Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (New York 1956).

Tripartic arrangements are a particularly powerful way of representing how structural forces are equilibrated – especially where such forces at play are not equal.<sup>29</sup> The great insight of ancient Greek mathematics (an insight forged in response to the ancients' horror at incommensurable numbers) was the conclusion that even if two quantities (a and c) were not equatable directly they could still be equated via their relation to a third quantity (b). Indeed the whole of Greek thought was attuned to such tripartic schemas: excess, mean, deficiency; rich, middle class, poor; kingship, aristocracy, democracy, etc.<sup>30</sup>

## VI

The mathematical discipline of classical composition reminds us that classical architecture is not simply the imitation of the natural dwelling (the cave) or "the primitive hut". If classical architecture did "imitate the primitive", it would be nothing more than a species of romanticism.

Of course, much of what passed for classical architecture in the late 18th or the 19th century was indeed motivated by a romantic search for primitive origins. But while the idea was widespread at this time that classical architecture was the rediscovery of a supererogatory origin, this idea did not go unchallenged. The French architectural theorist, Quatremère de Quincy (1755–1849), argued that there are in fact two ways to imitate Greek architecture. One consists in imitating its *style*, the other in grasping its *principle and spirit*.<sup>31</sup> Holding to a view that had been persistent from Aristotle to Shaftesbury, Quatremère maintained that classical architecture was an imitation of Nature. With the rise of romanticism, architecture in general – and classical architecture in particular – began to be looked to for its signifying of History, or, more particularly, for its capacity to symbolize the anthropogenesis of History.<sup>32</sup> The counter to this "stylistic" current was to insist on architecture as an imitator of Nature. This is not to be confused with the Romantic demand for a "return to Nature". Abbé Laugier (1713–69) thought that classical architecture was best understood as an imitation of the primitive dwelling that, in its rustic condition, provided a model of natural simplicity. In contrast, Quatremère's Nature was Classical Nature: *phusis*, not the Romantic primitive.

<sup>29</sup> Tripartic structures are also a way of eluding binary oppositions. It is ironic that, when so much effort was expended in the late 20th century (by poststructuralism and postmodernism) in the cause of circumventing binary oppositions, it turns out that the overcoming of binary oppositions was the "natural mode" of ancient Greek thought so long ago.

<sup>30</sup> This cognitive structure was to be reprised, at least in the realm of philosophy, by Hannah Arendt who conspicuously employed tripartic schemas in her writings: labor-work-action; thinking-willing-judgement, etc.

<sup>31</sup> Sylvia Lavin, *Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA 1992), 104.

<sup>32</sup> Postmodernism, in the late 20th century, was simply an extension of this impulse, which reached its *reductio ad absurdum* with Charles Jencks' proposal for a symbolic architecture. See Jencks, *Post-Modernism* (New York 1987).

Of course, when architecture emerged from the domain of vernacular carpentry, inevitably it did model itself on certain aspects of the hut. But, at the same time, it also distanced itself from the rustic model. It engaged in a kind of strangemaking (*xenopoiēsis*) of that model. In other words, it had to *estrangle itself from its origins* rather than simply reduplicate those origins. It was obliged to do this because the role of art (and specifically of architecture) was not simply to re-present (to make present again) the skill of the vernacular carpenter, but, much more ambitiously, to re-present the *phusis* of the *kosmos*. This was not an iconography of elemental nature or natural origins. Rather classical architecture sought to grasp the *principles of Nature* – to represent the way in which Nature was ordered according to the principles of mathematics, in particular those of proportionality. Architecture was an effort to picture the manner in which the forces that animate the subsystems<sup>33</sup> of Nature – biological, physical, social, political, intellectual, etc. – cohere into intelligible patterns and shapes.

Quatremère's point was that merely to imitate the natural dwelling – whether it was the hut, or even more primitively, the cave – gave architecture nothing to add. Such mimesis was merely copying. It gave the artist nowhere to go. In contrast architecture was a *reasoned art*. It represented relationships, divisions, proportions. This representation was abstract – an *intellectual* imitation of Nature. While the architect admired the skill of vernacular carpentry, the carpenters' *poiēsis*, or rather the architectural imitation of that *poiēsis*, was only "the skeleton of the art" of architecture. What made this skeleton so compelling was that it was "suited to being clothed with forms rationalized by proportion".<sup>34</sup>

Classical architecture achieved an estrangement from origins (the primitive hut), firstly, by transposing the wood of the carpenter into stone, and tree trunks into columns. Carpentry was akin to a rough draft rather than a model for architecture. An ingenious metamorphosis was carried out by the architect. The object imitated (the hut) was disguised under a veil of invention. *The truth of the object was masked with the appearance of fiction*.<sup>35</sup> Classical Greek buildings, far from being an unveiling of truth,<sup>36</sup> were "*truthful liars*". The metamorphosis of wood into stone fulfilled the function of imitation because it gave the viewer the intellectual pleasure of being "fooled without being led into error". A genial kind of untruth was necessary to the architect's mimesis. "In general the true aim of imitation is not to make a substitute so close to its model that resemblance produces an identity capable of deception and subterfuge. To the contrary, for us to enjoy imitation we must perceive that the imitating object is only the image of the imitated object."<sup>37</sup> The virtue of the architect's use of stone was that it was *not* wood, but *another* material. It held wood at a distance. Quatremère drew a

<sup>33</sup> As in Shaftesbury's neoStoic sense of "systems".

<sup>34</sup> Lavin (*supra* n. 31) 111.

<sup>35</sup> Lavin (*supra* n. 31) 111.

<sup>36</sup> For Heidegger on unveiling, see "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York 1975); "The Question Concerning Technology" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York 1977).

<sup>37</sup> Lavin (*supra* n. 31) 111.

contrast between the case of classical Greek strangemaking and the case of Egyptian architecture. Egyptian architecture was a mimesis (not of the hut but) of the cave – a case of stone *copying itself*. The result was an exercise in truthfulness. This offered architecture neither form, visual variety nor any relation to the spirit. Egyptian architecture consequently was cold, monotonist, and insipid.

## VII

*Estrangement from origins is a condition of kosmopoïēsis.* The architects' work of strangemaking is a crucial part of the creation of the world city. Reciprocally, it is only amongst strangers that the architect can realize a *kosmo political poetic* vision.

The first great attempt at forging a form of "life amongst strangers" was the Greek polis. Much is often made – to the point of cliché – of the fact that the polis excluded guest workers (metics) from citizenship. But of equal importance was the eagerness of the polis to employ the services of those guest workers, and the readiness of Hellenes to live amongst strangers. The thing, above all, that made possible a "life amongst strangers" was the city. The city opened-up places of activity, trade and sociability that were not determined by the alliances and dividing lines of kinship and family. In these places, a stranger could appear *as a stranger rather than as an enemy*. The stranger could find a place in a distant city through knowledge, public service, skill (*technē*) – and, more informally, by wit and conversations (*logoi*) that led to ties of acquaintanceship and friendship. Knowledge, skill, wit, and so on, were underpinned by intellectual virtue. The fulcrum of the stranger's city (*xenopolis*) was the demand and challenge of intellectual virtue. This is why scientific speculation assumes such an important presence in the Ionian cities – or similarly tragic drama in Athens, or mathematical cosmology in the Greek cities of Southern Italy. What draws strangers together is a shared fascination with the Mind. Music, theatre, philosophy, geography, architecture, travel writing, mathematics well-up in a world where puzzle-solving speculation about "the nature of the universe" forms a basic human tie. While strangers cannot meaningfully relate through the *nomos* (law/convention) of a society that is not their own nor can they share the affective ties of familial-like networks in places in which they are "aliens", they can nevertheless form enduring ties through the medium of speculative pursuits of many kinds.

*City life is inauthentic.* It is an artifice, a *truthful lie*. To speak of the city is to speak not of the urban citadel, or the cathedral town, or the palace center. It is not even to speak of the modern suburb, or the commuter "new town". In the history of urbanism, the city appears as a distinctive and circumscribed force. *The city proper is the meeting place of strangers*, and the life of these strangers is inauthentic. It is based on the truthful lie. In the city, there is no unveiling, no *aleitheia*. Rather strangers in the city constantly veil themselves from the too-close scrutiny of others – they hide their *nomoi/affectations*.

City dwellers "lie" to each other.<sup>38</sup> They "lie" in the sense that they wear "masks". The mask stands to the face as stone stands to wood in the work of the classical architect. It represents obliquely. It stands apart from the "original material" of the self in order that something more, something other than that "original material" might be shown to others. Strangers hide themselves in order to show another (much more oblique) aspect of their selves. Those who are "familiar" rather than "strange" to each other – whether it be the familiarity of sworn enemies or loyal allies, kin or neighbors – relate to each other through affection and convention (*nomos* in the widest sense of that word). In contrast, the stranger stands at an angle to both affection and *nomos*. Instead of affection, the stranger seeks "intellectual pleasure" – much as Quatremère described it: the pleasure of being "fooled without being led into error". This is the pleasure that one draws from reading a detective story, or orientating oneself in the maze of a foreign city. On a higher level, it is the pleasure derived from figuring out that the "swelling" of the column on a building is an imitation of the experience of loadbearing. It is the "ah-ha" feeling, the feeling of cognitive pleasure. Strangers enjoy the city precisely because of the opportunities it affords them for such pleasures.

Does this mean that they are indifferent to other human beings? The stranger certainly stands at an oblique angle to others. Yet "indifference" is a misleading characterization of the strangers' posture. The standpoint of the stranger is more one of "objectivity" than "indifference". Georg Simmel described the objectivity of the stranger thus: "Because he is not bound by roots to the particular constituents and partisan dispositions of the group, he confronts all of these with a distinctly 'objective' attitude, an attitude that does not signify mere detachment and nonparticipation, but is a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement."<sup>39</sup> Such objectivity – Simmel observed – is a kind of freedom. It implies freedom from those ties that prejudice judgment. "The objective man is not bound by ties which could prejudice his perception, his understanding, and his assessment of data."<sup>40</sup> Such freedom permits the stranger to experience and treat even his close relationships as though from a bird's-eye view. This synoptic relationship to the *nomoi* and affections of the life-world – what has been described by Vassilis Lambropoulos as a "nomoscopic" relation-

<sup>38</sup> The evasiveness of the city dweller and stranger has at least one precursor amongst non-civic social forms: viz., the figure of "the contrary" in tribal societies. "A few of the bravest men in the tribe constitute a small group known as the 'Contraries'. As the name suggests, these men always do the opposite of what is said; i.e., they say 'no' when they mean 'yes', approach when asked to go away, and so on. In battle, they are possessed of a special magic, a 'thunder bow', which causes them to accomplish acts of extraordinary bravery. One is called to the society of Contraries by a special vision, and thereafter he eats alone from special dishes, lives in a red lodge, and associates with ordinary people infrequently and in a distant manner." Elman Service, *Profile of Primitive Culture* (New York 1971).

<sup>39</sup> Georg Simmel, "The Stranger" in Donald Levine (ed.), *On Individuality and Social Form: Selected Writings* (Chicago 1971) 145.

<sup>40</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 39) 146.



ship to society<sup>41</sup> – is often regarded by others (“familiar” who move amongst other “familiar”) as threatening. From the standpoint of *nomoi*, the stranger is threatening because “he assesses [conditions] against standards that are more general and more objective; and his actions are not confined by custom, piety or precedent”.<sup>42</sup> The stranger is the one who is most likely to invoke “natural law” – an all-embracing “law” of Nature that lacks any of the specific contents of ordinary law or convention, and that is more like the *form* of Nature than any set of rules. From the standpoint of affections, the fear is that the stranger is one whose conscience is difficult to arouse. The stranger, to all appearances, walks the streets in a state of detachment – unable to connect with the particular needs and sufferings of others.<sup>43</sup>

It is true that remoteness is an aspect of objectivity. As Simmel suggested, one can only have very *general* qualities in common with a stranger.<sup>44</sup> Familiars (“organically connected persons”) on the other hand connect on the basis of specific traits. Particularity is not a connective force for strangers. Indeed the stranger can be quite aloof from the claims of such particularity. Thus there is much less of the ordinary affective ties (either love or hate, solidarity or fear) between strangers. Neither socially-prescribed (traditional) affectivity nor “authentic” (modern) displays of the heart are much practiced by strangers. Strangers stand apart from ritualized communities, and prefer the true lie to unimaginative truth. They enjoy a freedom from the claustrophobia of culture. The relationship of friendship – based on intellectual pleasure – is much more compelling for the stranger than the affective huddle of neighbors, kin or “national” compatriots.<sup>45</sup> The strangers who become friends, and who meet in the public park for a game of chess, or in the café to discuss the movies they have seen, are bound by their mutual fascination with *intellectual ludens*. Just as strangers in this way maintain a certain distance from affective bonds, they also have a certain objective distance from the ties of *nomos*. This does not mean that they are asocial or disregarding of “common things” [*res publica*]. Neither does it mean that strangers have no means of social interconnection. Rather it is simply the case that strangers who are citydwellers relate to each other (as Aristotle long ago noted) through *phusis*, not through convention (*nomos*).

<sup>41</sup> Vassilis Lambropoulos, “The Rule of Justice”, *Thesis Eleven* 40 (Cambridge, MA 1995); “Nomoscopic Analysis” in *Ethical Politics* a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 95: 4 (Durham, NC 1996).

<sup>42</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 39) 146.

<sup>43</sup> Even someone essentially sympathetic to the xenopolis as Richard Sennett displays qualms about this. See his *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York 1990) chapter 5.

<sup>44</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 39) 146.

<sup>45</sup> Jaucourt in his *Encyclopedie* essay on friendship described the friend – aside from the family friend-confidant – as 1. a person “with whom one has nothing in common but simple literary amusements” and 2. a person “whom one may cultivate for the pleasure and charm of his conversation”. Quoted in Sennett (*supra* n. 43) 80.

## VIII

The greatest "architects of the city" have always intuitively grasped the importance of *phusis* as a connective force. The "architecture of the city" treats the building as a representation of *phusis*. Great architecture is a *mimesis* not of the *nomos* of a community but the *phusis* of the *kosmos*. *Phusis* is universal. It is the aspect of the city that is universal. Whereas in dress, custom, opinion and origin the denizens of the city *differ*, by their participation in Nature – or more particularly in the material forms that represent *phusis* – they share something *in common*: viz., the *res publica*. The great art and architecture of the city is a representation of *phusis*. No matter how oblique is the everyday relationship of strangers, no matter how apparently indifferent they are to that which "affects" their fellows (to the crises of everyday existence), strangers come together by their mutual attraction to the images of *phusis*.

It is the inability to grasp this that deprived so much of the "classical revival" architecture of the nineteenth century of the power that it sought self-consciously. Nineteenth century Neo Classicism treated the building not as a representation of unchanging Nature – "unchanging" in the sense that it always contains a conflict of forces – but as a set of conventions. Not only was the Classical reduced to a species of stylistic convention, but it (necessarily) appeared as one style amongst many. The tradition of architectonics had imagined Nature as a field as contesting forces whose tension, and countervailing weights, could be outwardly represented in the shape of the building. When this agon was replaced by the "battle of styles", History was substituted for Nature. Each style promised an answer to the question: what is the authentic origin of the nation? Each style promised an unveiling of the true source from which the nation had grown. Whereas dwellers in the *kosmopolis* had known that *phusis* could only be represented by a lie, the conventions that represented origins were, purportedly, true. True in the sense of authentic. To demonstrate their truth, such styles used "honest" materials or were researched with scholarly "rigor". Indeed, anything to *disguise* the artifice of convention. "Truth", it would seem after all, was a fiction, a mask, but still a fiction that *denied its fictive status*. And "truth" as a self-denying fiction always begged the question: is there such a thing as a true convention? The question: Which bit of history was the true-authentic source of the nation? was really unanswerable. The consequence of attempting to answer the unanswerable was "cultural wars" – battles of styles that eventually exhausted themselves by their ridiculousness. Patently, the "truths" that were lined-up in these wars of *nomoi* were fictions, and not very compelling fictions at that; at the very same time, the self-conscious lie of the wearer of the mask (the stranger) was unattainable by the purveyor of truth and authenticity.

Convention by its very "nature" – its unnatural nature – is so variable as to defy all efforts at "authentication". Thus the most realistic revival always proved, in the modern age, to be fake no matter what efforts were made to prove its truth-claims. The search for origins compelled nation-builders to clothe the nation in stage costumes that were earnestly researched in detail but were still, for all of

that, an illusionistic covering. When the elites of 19th century Greece rustled through the trunk of History, they pulled out Periklean, Hellenistic, Byzantine apparel. The trouble with this was that a permanent suspension of disbelief in the illusion was difficult to sustain, especially when stage History was so egregiously selective. For example, it required a massive act of forgetting – one nonetheless dictated by the modern national Greek self-conception – to put to one side the history of the Greeks under the Ottomans.<sup>46</sup> Authentic Greek self-understanding had no place for Ottoman history. Under the modern regime of truth, remembrance enforced a kind of forgetting, just as truth demanded a kind of illusionism. Revival proved in the end to be a type of burial – entombment at the moment of rebirth.

In the modern age, nationalist *erasures* of the past proved of ultimately greater importance than *revivals* of the past. Thus while the Neo stylings of the modern Greek state were necessarily transitory, the selective repudiation of the Ottoman past served as a basis of an enduring rejection of the *xenopoleis* – the symbolic rejection of all of the cities around the littoral of the Adriatic, Black Sea and Asia Minor, where Greeks had once lived and journeyed amongst strangers, and where they had constructed their abodes, churches, and banks in the midst of strangers. Via this act of rejection, the Ottomans became the Turks, the *bête noire par excellence* of the modern Greek nation. In the 19th century it was still possible for a Greek to prefer living in Constantinople to Athens. Constantinople was the *xenopolis*; Athens was the capital of the “home-land”. Constantinople was full of oblique lies; Athens was saturated with home-truths. Constantinople was a “world city”; Athens was provincial. To compensate for the second-rateness of Athens, Greek political elites dreamed up a Neo Byzantine vision (the “Great Idea”) of an extended Greece that was intended to absorb much of the collapsing Ottoman Empire under Greek rule. But this experiment in “style politics” ended in disaster in 1922 (when the Turkish national army crushed invading Greek national forces). “The Turk” thereby became the enduring enemy of the Greek nation, even if, after the watershed of 1922, this hostility played itself more often as farce than tragedy. The enemy was always more the cartoon demon, than the deadly beast.

While Turkey did not prove to be ancient Persia reborn, questions, seemingly long buried, of relations between Greeks on either side of the Aegean were reopened by the events of 1922. The most fascinating encounter amongst ancient Greeks – fascinating because it ended neither in embrace nor in rejection – was that between the Greeks of Attica and those of Ionia. Periklean Athens welcomed the mathematizing minds of the Ionian Greeks – like Hippodamos – treating them as guest-friends. Attic legislators even thought teasingly of extending citizenship to some of their number, though eventually gave way on this in the name of *ethnos*. In the 20th century, the flood of Greeks from Asia Minor into Athens (the “swarm of wasps”) brought in its train a concerted effort to redefine this potpourri

<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, Christian Hansen was an exception – making arguments for the preservation of the Ottoman, as well as classical and Byzantine, past.

of refugees as Greek *nationals*. In this case, citizenship was *extended* to those from the other side of the Aegean but for reasons that were much the same as those that centuries before had caused Attic Greeks to *refuse* citizenship to Ionian xenetics. Both times, *the Attic concept of citizenship rested on the idea of nomos*. It was not enough to live as an active member in a “shining city” of ordered clarity, simple beauty, and elegant lines to qualify as a citizen. Ancient Attica never fully embraced Ionian rationalism. Hippodamos’ Piraeus remained at a distance from Athens, which retained great affection for the law of its soil all the while dancing with the Ionian *phusikoi*. Where ancient Piraeus was the product of a deliberate making, Athens remained the product of ad hoc growth. By the 4th century BC, the archaic irregularity of Athens was the source of some comment – and was quite at odds with the increasingly planned character of the Hellenistic city.<sup>47</sup> Ancient Athens proved to be the recipient of the *theory* but not the *practice* of the ideal city. While its philosophers could re-collect the beautiful transitive geometries of Ionian provenance, the archaic (landed) aspect of the Attica plain somehow always permeated the city, no matter its claim to a cosmopolitan status.

In Periklean Athens, only one third of citizens lived in urban areas, and citizenship remained closely tied to land ownership. Conversely, free non-citizens, barred from owning land, were concentrated in the city and harbor town.<sup>48</sup> In modern Athens, land (albeit in a less literal, more symbolic fashion) was also a defining feature of citizenship. Under the auspices of Greek nation-building, citizenship, *ethnos*, and territory became closely intertwined. The modern Hellenic vision of Greece was one in which the symbols of landscape (soil, sea, sky) dominated over architectonic figures of *poiēsis*, and the idiomatic *topos* prevailed over the syncratic *phusis* of the city. Modern Athens at least did avoid the overt reiteration of the “topocentric” ordering typical of the postclassical Mediterranean town – exemplified in the skewed form of the hill-side town where topography impresses itself on the orientation of houses and the arrangement of individual streets, giving the town (especially when seen from above) a characteristic “cubist” form – a form that became central to 20th century consciousness in the wake of Picasso’s 1906–1912 paintings. All the same, *topos* did assert itself in Athens – for the larger urban “composition” of modern Athens was achieved, in many places, by splicing together sections of urban grid in the manner of a cubist geometric collage. Topocentricity, denied at one level, was asserted at another, more abstract level.

20th century Athens inclined to rationalism, yet the beautiful discipline of a Hippodamian rationalism eluded it. What was missing were the subtle geometries of classical rationalism – geometries that resulted from the *graduated* application of the surveyor’s measure (*metron*) to the earth (*gē*). The classical Ionians developed the idea of laying a numerically based grid (repeating rectangles) over the land, thereby mastering the idiomacy of *topos*. But what was also crucially built into this grid was a strong sense of *ratio* between private, public, and sacred.

<sup>47</sup> R.E. Wycherley, *How The Greeks Built Cities* (New York 1976 [1962]).

<sup>48</sup> M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Greeks* (Harmondsworth 1966 [1963]) 70–71.

That is to say, the necessary repetitions of the grid were departed from when spaces were allocated for public and sacred buildings. Such spaces might be constituted by the marking out of a city block that was larger than the residential block, or by changing (skewing) the orientation of the public block. These departures were carefully scaled. The point of the departure was to achieve a *rhythmical ordering of space* – that is, to break up (from time to time) the repetition of regular block dimensions with strong accents. Like so many other modern cities, 20th century Athens adopted a grid-like pattern but without the scaled gradations and rhythmical variations of the classical (Ionian) schema. The variations on the theme of the grid were not public squares or places of worship but rather the “irregularities” that flowed from the “bad planning” of a state where connections and favors were the coin of governance.

Illegal development, unfinished housing, unchecked pollution, ramshackle industrialization, derelict projects, manic traffic congestion, and apartment shortages became by-words for Athenian urbanism in the second half of the 20th century – providing a parodic antithesis to Hippodamian rationalism. Some of the reasons for this state of affairs were very ancient. Modern Athenians suffered as much from a lack of private credit institutions as did Athenians in Solon's time. (Solon is justly famous for having freed Athenians from debt slavery.) Mediterranean capitalism never developed the credit institutions of its Atlantic counterpart. One of the consequences of this was a lack of finance for domestic and commercial building. But there were also more recent sources of Athens' urban afflictions. “Nation state building” privileged *distributive* social mechanisms – tax collection and bureaucratic allocation. Under conditions where Atlantic-style market institutions were weakly developed, this tendency was exacerbated. Correspondingly, forms of political resistance focused on controlling or evading the distributive state – either through the web of client-boss relations,<sup>49</sup> military coups,<sup>50</sup> or social “movements”,<sup>51</sup> or by such pervasive techniques as tax evasion.

As power and wealth was confirmed in its shift to the Atlantic, modern Athens (like so many Mediterranean cities in modernity) acquired a porous character.<sup>52</sup> In the place of clear boundaries and demarcations, spaces in the porotic city overlapped in a cubist manner. Inasmuch as these skewed geometries were geometries, *rationalism still asserted itself*; all the same this was a *broken-down rationalism*. It had a warmth missing in modern (Cartesian) rationalism but lacked the lucidity of a classical rationalism. Porosity was the consequence of the “make do” mentality of cities that no longer had the resources to plan kosmopoietically. Resources that once had been devoted to the city were either

<sup>49</sup> The popular, everyday mechanism for getting the resources or jobs disposed of by the state.

<sup>50</sup> The technique of excluded provincials who mounted the military (Colonel's) coup in the 1960s.

<sup>51</sup> The signature style of the PASOK party in the 1970s.

<sup>52</sup> The notion of porosity was developed by Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch in their writings on Naples and Positano in the 1920s. See John Ely on the Positano milieu in the special issue edited by Peter Murphy – on Friendship – of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 97:1 (Durham 1997).

simply unavailable or else were now absorbed into the state. It ultimately mattered little whether the state took the form of a gubernatorial administration, kingdom, or nation state. Ad-hocery kept the city alive, but managed to do this only in a "make shift" manner. This contributed to the charm of the towns that so beguiled 19th and 20th century visitors to the Mediterranean littoral. But the cost of such charming decay was great. For the near-to-universal tendency to replace "city building" with "state building" meant that the conditions for civic *energeia* deteriorated. Politics in the classic sense of *the making of the city by means of the city* was sidelined by a dialectic of *nomos* and *anomie*. The Mediterranean state wavered between the assertion of the authority of law and the counter-assertion of *anomic* (anarchistic), criminal (bandit, mafia), decisionistic (dictatorial and military), bureaucratic (allocative), and patrimonial (clientelist) forces.

What the dialectic of *nomos* and *anomie* excluded was the power of *poiēsis* (the making/poetics of the city). Thus, while 20th century Athens was composed of people who had come from "other places",<sup>53</sup> it failed to recapitulate the creative peak of the *xenopolis*. It played out its dramas instead on the stage of nationality and state. Many strangers came to this city – not least the dispossessed from Asia Minor – but the struggle over access to the state subsumed the *xenetic* need to create a Neo Polis. The stranger turned away from the abyss of creation, and became a supplicant in the corridors of the distributive state. The vocation of the stranger was thereby yielded. The decisive turning point for this, as for much else, was 1922. The events of that year signified less the moment of the recognition of an enemy (Turkey) than the leaving-behind of the *xenopolis* for the *home-land*. In this act was begun the process of *domesticating the stranger*.

Zygmunt Bauman was right when he suggested that the nation-state is designed primarily to deal with the problem of strangers, not enemies.<sup>54</sup> This was certainly true of the Greek nation. Its development corresponded with the disappearance of a Greek presence in the once polyglot cities of Alexandria, Odessa, Smyrna. What followed was the diminishing power of the objective gaze of the Hellenic stranger-traveler who, with one eye on *phusis*, had moved with great ease amongst "foreign" customs and practices – not only those of the many nationalities that crowded the old Ottoman Empire but also those of the many separate and far-flung diasporic communities of Greeks. This process was archetypical of a story to be repeated many times under the impress of *nationalization* – the retrenchment of dispersed groups into national territories.

In the events of 1922, Greece acquired its symbolic national enemy – with all the disputes and incidents, not to mention clownish posturing that this entailed (on both sides) – but the single most important effect of the consolidation of the nation-state along the shores the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea was the near elimination of *xeniteia*. The undoing of *xeniteia*, however, was not universal. There were those who always refused to forgo their Constantinopolitan or Alexandrian dreams, or else who refused to treat such dreams – as Georgios

<sup>53</sup> Asia Minor, Constantinople, the Greek islands, Alexandria, etc.

<sup>54</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Oxford 1991) 63.

Theotokas did – as nostalgia to be exorcised through the novel. Figures like the poet Constantine Cavafy, the architect turned composer Iannis Xenakis, and the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. That “international faction” – those who would not let go of the thousands of connections to the small-h history of *xeniteia*, and who prized especially the intellectual virtue of those who journey amongst strangers – for these characters, many in self-imposed exile from the *palaioelladites*<sup>55</sup> of Athens, the allure of the architectonic practices and the vision of the *xenopolis* would remain undiminished.<sup>56</sup> In the refractions of the xenopoietic vision was to be found the image of that most allusive of things: *the modern classical*.



<sup>55</sup> The denizens of the provincial Greece that formed the core of the Greek nation in the 19th century – a Greece without the sophistication of the Ottoman world.

<sup>56</sup> On some of these characters, see Peter Murphy, “The Roar of Whispers: Cosmopolitanism and Neohellenism”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 15.2 (Baltimore 1997).

## On the Notion of the Tragedy of Culture

Vassilis Lambropoulos

Explorations of classical origins tend to focus on themes that promise diachronic, if interrupted, continuity, and therefore make possible the mapping of survivals. To take the eminent example of tragedy, studies usually concentrate on figures, such as Oedipus, or issues, such as love, whose transformations can be traced through several works, languages, and periods. Explorations that are not premised on survival but analyze creative adaptations of classical material are more rare. Such explorations are less interested in locating ancient origins than in discovering the operations of classicism itself, of classicizing efforts within cultures which felt in a variety of ways that they had to deal with an antiquity of their own – with archaizing trends in their midst. A case in point is the idea of the Tragic, which emerged at the end of the eighteenth-century with German Idealism as part of its attempt to establish an indigenous Hellenism. The Tragic idea was not a continuation of ancient theatrical practices but an adaptation of dramatic theory to metaphysical purposes. Although certain aspects of it, like catharsis, could be traced to ancient sources, its overall constitution owes much more to post-Enlightenment ethico-political concerns. In this paper, I analyze a particular articulation of the Tragic that highlights its close links with modern cultural and political theory, and thus I offer a philosophical scrutiny of modernist classicism and its aftermath.

When it comes to the highly contested area of contemporary culture, most commentators seem to agree on two major points: first, culture is something positive and worth-celebrating; and second, recently it has been in serious decline. There is no lack of diagnoses dealing with this dramatic and deeply disappointing development. However, the idea of culture as a tragic struggle with catastrophic results is not as recent as apocalyptic post-structuralist (Jean Baudrillard) or traditionalist (Allan Bloom) thought would have us believe.<sup>1</sup> It is at least as old as the twentieth century and has been an integral part of the self-definition of High Modernity. In order to understand better the notion of the tragedy of culture, which has achieved such a great currency in our time, it is worth returning to the essay that first drew its parameters, Georg Simmel's seminal "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture".

Simmel opens his essay by positing Hegel's distinction between subjective and objective spirit as the fundamental dualism of soul and structure within the realm of the spirit. If the soul is the essence of the individual, structures like custom, morality, religion, law, science, technology, and art are the individual's

<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*. Edited by Mark Poster (Stanford, CA 1988); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York 1987).



material expression. Once these structures are created, they acquire autonomy and stability – a “fixed but timelessly valid”<sup>2</sup> existence. Although such an autonomous existence was part of the individual’s aspirations in creating them, this achievement triggers a strange tension within the life of the soul, within subjective life, whose running stream, “restless but finite in time”,<sup>3</sup> keeps flowing and changing all the time. Once human works are made, they are endowed with an independence that separates them from the soul of their maker. They now create their own universe, that of culture. In turn, the soul confronts culture in different ways, experiencing attraction or repulsion, fusion with or estrangement from its contents. Thus a division is created between soul and its works which generates “innumerable tragedies”.<sup>4</sup> The question, then, arises as to how this separation can be overcome. For Simmel, that is the question of culture, which is “lodged in the middle of this dualism”.<sup>5</sup>

The source of the problem is the dialectical necessity of form itself. Soul is more-than-soul – it is also its pulsating capacities in their constant “drive towards form”,<sup>6</sup> towards a higher articulation of individuality. The inner drive of its organic evolution toward greater perfection demands the integration of its history and the manifestation of its destiny, which can only be achieved through form. Thus Simmel’s argument implies that soul is also less-than-soul since the soul by itself, without the help of forms, cannot find fulfillment.

Culture ameliorates the soul’s deficiency and serves self-perfection by giving a meaningful direction to the drive toward form and by leading the life process to ever advanced stages of unified development. “Culture is the way that leads from the closed unity through the unfolded multiplicity to the unfolded unity.”<sup>7</sup> Through its operations, singularities spread out, potentialities mature into actualities, drives converge into a path. Thus culture is the synthesis of subjective and objective spirit. In Simmel’s view, culture is both path and destination: its objective forms are both “stations” through which the soul needs to pass and the material of that special quality acquired by subjective life during such a successful passage – the unique quality of cultivation which establishes harmony between the free human activity and its products, between the subjective and the objective spirit of cultural values.

The essay could well end here, having reached a comfortable reconciliation of its original dualism. Yet, Simmel is not satisfied with this happy synthesis. His attention is drawn to “the paradox of culture”<sup>8</sup> – the fact that subjective life can reach inner perfection only through extrinsic means, that individual cultivation requires objective culture. To the extent that it obeys the dialectical logic of the

<sup>2</sup> Georg Simmel, “On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture” [1911]. In *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*. Trans. K. Peter Eitzkorn (New York 1968) 27.

<sup>3</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 27.

<sup>4</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 27.

<sup>5</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 27.

<sup>6</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 28.

<sup>7</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 29.

<sup>8</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 30.

spirit, effecting a synthesis of the subjective and the objective, culture is not a paradox. On the contrary, it is the agent of that distinct human growth known as cultivation. The real paradox is the heteronomous development of the autonomous subject, the fact that the autonomy of the soul is violated by the heteronomous drive toward autonomous structures. What puzzles Simmel is the scandal of form. How can the soul's perfection be an inner one if it requires the assimilation of alien forms? Why should an attempt to posit subjective autonomy result in an admission of the objective autonomy of spiritual culture?

After only a few pages, Simmel's essay, having questioned its assumptions, reaches an impasse. Despite the beautiful promise of culture for a harmonious synthesis of subject and object, the iconolatric ignominy of forms, the paradoxical independence of representation, of human-made images, emerges to discredit the hope of admixture and union. Why should there be a need for such a synthesis in the first place, the author seems to wonder. To salvage his inquiry, he begins all over again by positing once more a basic dualism, this time in starker dialectical terms. By its very nature, the spirit is condemned to an eternally unfulfilled motion that first drives it toward objects and then, without allowing it to penetrate them, drives it back to its own orbit. There is no way out of this self-contained, cyclical motion. The mutual attraction and revulsion between subject and object continues unresolved. This situation takes on a special importance when the two sides are both spiritual, that is, when the objects of attraction are objectifications of spirit, namely, structures of culture, and consequently means of cultivation – "ethical and intellectual, social and aesthetic, religious and technical forms".<sup>9</sup> In these cases, for a fruitful encounter to occur, the objects need to become subjective (as a medium of individual cultivation) and the subject objective (as an experience of spirituality crystallized in forms). This does not entail fusion but the possibility of a certain reciprocity in the realm of the spirit.

This new start enables Simmel to focus his inquiry better in that it moves it closer to his philosophical concerns. The notion of overcoming and the earlier ideal of fusion are abandoned. The division between subjective and objective spirituality is described in terms of resentment and hostility only. The topic of the essay is defined as "the deep estrangement or animosity which exists between the organic and creative process of the soul and its contents and products: the vibrating, restless life of the creative soul, which develops toward the infinite, contrasts with its fixed and ideally unchanging product and its uncanny feedback effect, which arrests and indeed rigidifies this liveliness. Frequently it appears as if the creative movement of the soul was dying from its own product."<sup>10</sup> Here the domain of culture begins to turn into a nightmare.

Simmel finds two forces at work in the unfolding of cultivation: a constructive one, where individual growth assimilates objective spirit, and a destructive one, where individual growth obeys the logic of forms. Thus culture presents humans with its conflicting demands. These demands are not extrinsic but lie at

<sup>9</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 30.

<sup>10</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 31.

the heart of life itself since life has a dual function: as a process, it marches forward, unfolding and maturing according to its inner nature; as a creation, it produces objects with a distinct cultural logic that follow their own course of growth. The independence and stability of their existence puts the flow of life at risk when life pursues its highest development, cultivation, and seeks to use them as means. If the flow passes through their domain, they threaten to arrest it. Thus human development needs to both create and escape the power of its creations to avoid being extinguished by them. The achievement of permanence undermines the possibility of movement. Instead of cultivating it, spiritual forms can lead inner life into paralysis. By taking on a life of their own, external values can stifle the human capacity to confer value by objectifying its spirit. "Herein lies one fundamental form of our suffering from our past, our own dogma, and our own fantasies."<sup>11</sup> Within "the basic tension between the process and content of consciousness", the discharge of creative process and the fixed shape of works and norms are fundamentally opposed. The structures of life as creation can freeze the rhythm of life as process. Rhythm and structure are simply antithetical. The dualism of life and form is insurmountable. Form, created as a vessel for the spirit, turns into its coffin.

Once again, it is not the opposition between subjective and objective spirit that disturbs Simmel so much as the heteronomy of the former, in other words, the scandal of form. Why should the human mind, will, knowledge, or creativity be invested in material and non-material structures? Why should the soul, the source of all values, need contours and configurations, figures and formations to express itself? Why should the "completely closed reality which we call our subject"<sup>12</sup> need those outside products of the objective intellect "which have grown into an ideal existence"?<sup>13</sup> Why should personal perfection be mediated by the supra-personal perfection of objectively spiritual realities? Why should cultivation be meaningful only when endowed with objectification? Why should the soul be embodied in form? Why should the spirit be embodied?

Simmel is tempted and frightened by the graven images of forms. Even though in his descriptions their world seems to include all lasting products of human productivity, it is neither their materiality nor their endurance that disturbs him. Things or habits that simply exist are of no interest to him. It is only when they take on the life of forms, when they take on the spirit of structures and they enter the realm of mimesis and signification, that they begin to puzzle and alarm him, like the specter of a lost innocence. More than their embodiment in communal customs or religious practices, legal rules or political institutions, it is the artistic incarnation of forms that appears to Simmel to have deprived humans of an Edenic stage where the world of shapes and the word of God were one.

Having filled the stage with Hegelian dualisms, and having prepared the ultimate duel between rhythm and structure, Simmel appears ready to stage the fifth act in the drama of form. Everything in his argument so far, indeed every-

<sup>11</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 31.

<sup>12</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 38.

<sup>13</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 36.

thing in his life's work, has prepared him for the task. His readers are ready to hear the darkest secret of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. But it is not meant to be. Simmel refuses to take the next step. In this thinker's hands, Idealism can go no further. Simmel's refusal will mark the course of dialectics for the rest of the century as a thoroughly negative one. Instead of addressing the question of form itself, of figuration and incarnation, Simmel again takes up the question of culture and its mediating role in another effort to explore the possibility of synthesis, namely, of cultural assimilation. With this regress, philosophy abandons its responsibility to an Idealist project, as first expressed in its "Oldest System-Program" of 1796, and commits itself to an anthropology of modernity, specifically, an aesthetics of social life. However, as we shall see later, despite the abandonment of the system itself, it continues to observe the Program's commitment to a tragic viewpoint.

Its original anthropological turn, which was initiated by Left Hegelians like Feuerbach, had taken philosophy in the direction of society. By relinquishing the socio-economic function of capitalism to economists in *The Philosophy of Money*, and instead adopting Modernism as an emblem of modern life, Simmel gave philosophy a new anthropological turn, this time toward culture itself and its role in modernity. "When Simmel's profuse writings are compared with those of Weber, Sombart and the mass of lesser figures in the budding German *Sozialwissenschaften*, one is struck by the paucity of attention Simmel pays to the state, the church, and other foreground powers... As a matter of fact, even the category of *society* plays but a subsidiary role in Simmel's sociology: society is just a fickle, fragile and perpetually changing form sedimented by the endless process of *sociality*."<sup>14</sup> His contemporaries and students often remarked on this approach, calling him "the genuine philosopher of Impressionism"<sup>15</sup> and "a collector of standpoints which he assembles all around truth without ever wanting or being able to possess it".<sup>16</sup> Durkheim described his work as "philosophical variations on certain aspects of social life", while Benjamin noted that his philosophy "already signifies a transition from strict academic philosophy towards a poetic or essayistic orientation".<sup>17</sup> They all seemed to agree that "Simmel limits himself to wandering along the exterior of the phenomena; the concept that serves him as a guiding thread in each case cannot sustain any profound interpretation".<sup>18</sup> This far-reaching reorientation can be explained in many ways that would place it in its historical context. One account could relate it to the emergence of the professional social sciences, which made the social their exclusive field of specialization. Others could relate it to the fragmentation of the public sphere or to aestheticist trends in all the fin-de-siècle arts. The emergence of *Philosophische*

<sup>14</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge 1991) 168.

<sup>15</sup> Georg Lukács, "Georg Simmel" [1918]. Trans. Margaret Cerullo. *Theory, Culture & Society* 8: 3 (1991) 146.

<sup>16</sup> Bloch quoted in David Frisby, *Georg Simmel* (Sussex 1984) 146.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Frisby (*supra* n. 16) 147.

<sup>18</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "Georg Simmel" [1920]. In *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA 1995) 244-245.

*Kultur* (which Simmel gave as a title to one of his essay collections in 1911),<sup>19</sup> of culture as a philosophical concern, can be traced to Simmel's decisive turn to aesthetic problems after 1908 and to his constant negotiations with Weber, Marx, and Nietzsche.

A more philosophical account of the cultural turn of philosophical anthropology would begin by identifying culture at the convergence of two trends within turn-of-the-century philosophy, *Lebensphilosophie* and hermeneutics, in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey. It is at this juncture that the vitalist drives of the first trend and the interpretive demands of the second produced the category of experience/*Erlebnis*, the idea of life in all its variety and complexity. Hermann Cohen was also working on Kant's notion of "experience" during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century but his "transcendental method", despite its initial popularity, failed to explain adequately the conditions on which the experience of things-in-themselves was based. Dilthey proposed the grand enterprise of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the sciences of the Spirit, as the comprehensive approach to all the manifestations of human experience. The designation of this approach raised the question of the paradigmatic domain in which experience could be studied, of the site where the celebration of life and the practice of interpretation could interact and reinforce each other so that the interpretation of life and the life of interpretation could fulfill their mutual tasks.

Dilthey found this domain in history, arguing that historicist interpretation was the one most faithful to the plurality of experience. Simmel, however, assigned this place to culture, expanding on Dilthey's designation of a separate sphere of "objectifications of life" for the (legal, scientific, and artistic) cultural systems confronting the individual. Whereas Dilthey posited a principle of integration, Simmel began with a diagnosis of "differentiation". Among Dilthey's "categories of life", he focused on the relation of inner (mental content) and outer (material manifestation). Simmel always made individual experience the focus of his inquiry. "In fact, in countless cases the objects that engage the philosopher's reflections stem from the realm of experiences and encounters of the highly differentiated individual."<sup>20</sup> But because he understood objectification as alienation, he concluded that only culture can heal the division of experience between life and cultural systems. Only in cultural values can the spirit find its best expression as well as (self)understanding. As Simmel declared, culture is the synthesis between subjective and objective spirit. Only in its domain is a non-alienated, authentic experience possible. As a result of this view, not only is culture internally valorized but life itself, as a creative becoming, acquires the production of culture as its paramount goal.

Simmel did not heed Weber's repeated warnings against attitudes that would allow artistic criteria to become cultural values and influence social or political life. Until the end of his life, he was seeking solace from the pathologies of modernity in the metaphysics of culture. In this regard, his legacy was immense:

<sup>19</sup> Georg Simmel, *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essays* (Leipzig 1911).

<sup>20</sup> Kracauer (*supra* n. 19) 226.

the compensatory-turned-redemptive potential of culture has remained a constant point of reference and promise for philosophy and its sciences of the spirit. For Husserl and Gramsci, for Adorno and Raymond Williams, for post-structuralism and post-colonialism, the twin issues of life and interpretation still converge in the principle of "experience", the impressionism of the refined senses, which seeks in culture its authentic articulation. Whether possessed more by hermeneutic responsibilities (as in critical formalisms) or by vitalist exactions (as in identity expressivisms), the hope for a harmonious experience still rests on culture as the last refuge of dialectics from alienation, the transcendent realm of reconciliation.

According to Simmel's essay, culture unifies subject and object by incorporating objective phenomena in the development of subjects as a means toward personal growth, that is, without compromising the objectivity of such phenomena. In this way, the spirit reaches perfection in subject and object, enabling both of them to transcend their materiality and become respectively more-than-life and more-than-construct. Thus culture is by definition a synthesis since it interpenetrates subjective and objective spirit, bringing together personal development and objective value. "A synthesis, however, is not the only and most immediate form of unity, since it always presupposes the divisibility of elements as an antecedent or as a correlative. Viewing synthesis as the most sublime of formal relationships between spirit and world could occur only during an age which is as analytical as the modern."<sup>21</sup> Having contemplated cultural reconciliation once more, Simmel proceeds to denounce it by recalling the division it presupposes. This time, he historicizes this ideal, arguing that only ages like the modern one consider synthesis the highest form of unity. In reality, interpenetration of the two realms can cancel the originary duality of cultural creation. The ultimate illusion is not the basic tension between subject and object but their presumed synthesis, that is, the entire dialectic which culture was supposed to fulfill. It is only the moderns who wistfully attribute to culture the power to transcend the division of the spirit. This ideal is nothing but a chimera that enables them to impose artificial unity where there is only separation and friction. Instead of a path or a destination, it is a beautiful, seductive lie. Instead of a solution, culture is the problem. What we are witnessing here, at the very moment when culture is created as a distinct object of study and speculation, is the decisive role that the tragic idea played in this creation – a role that it continues to play in cultural studies and reflections in general.

As an example of the ineluctability of "the tragedy of duality",<sup>22</sup> Simmel cites its survival in cases of over-specialization, where people excel in a certain skill or branch of knowledge without becoming truly cultivated.<sup>23</sup> Such a cleavage in the structure of culture is not just historical but foundational, turning the paradox of culture into a tragedy. There is a constitutive friction between the

<sup>21</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 35.

<sup>22</sup> Raymond Aron, "Culture and Life" [1938]. In Lewis A. Coser (ed.), *Georg Simmel* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1965) 140.

<sup>23</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 39.

inner drive of human personality and the inner logic of its creations. The source of this tragic friction is now located not in the heteronomous drive toward objectification but in another drive, one toward subjectification. Since the time humans developed an internal fissure by positing a self for themselves, an unbridgeable gap opened up between interiority and exteriority. "From the moment that man began to say 'I' to himself, and became an object beyond and in comparison with himself, from the same moment in which the contents of the soul were formed together into a center point – from that time and based on that central form the ideal had to grow according to which everything connected with the center point formed a unit, self-contained and self-sufficient. But the contents with which the 'I' must organize itself into its own unified world do not belong to it alone. They are given to it from a spatially, temporarily idealized realm outside; they are simultaneously the contents of different social and metaphysical, conceptual and ethical worlds."<sup>24</sup> Simmel identifies an original sin in the drive toward subjectification, which destroyed the unity of a single, undifferentiated universe. By positing an autonomous subjectivity, by seeking to know themselves as such, humans expose themselves to the temptations of several outside worlds. Exterior worlds of religious, social, philosophical and other structures and values always seek to draw humans into them, dissolve their individuality, and make them obey their dictates. Some individuals manage to find a balance among all those dictates by ordering them around themselves. "The process of culture, however, compresses the parties of this collision into extremely close contact by making the development of the subject conditional on the assimilation of objective material. Thus the metaphysical dualism of subject and object, which seemed to have been overcome by the formation of culture, reappears in the conflict between subjective and objective developments."<sup>25</sup> Hence culture, instead of overcoming the division, makes its presence more acutely felt. Cultivation constitutes a sin and at the same time the tragic awareness of the separation inherent in metaphysics.

Simmel is groping toward a primordial time of pure innocence – a time before culture, before knowledge, before division, before the self. If the first friction took place within interiority, there must have been a pre-dialectical stage where interiority itself had no meaning, where a natural state of things without names or identities prevailed. But that stage is beyond the reach of the dialectical tools available to modern thought. Thus the exploration of the tragic takes another abrupt anthropological turn, shifting from metaphysics to the experience of the domination of commodities in cultural life.

With this change of perspective, the "ominous independence"<sup>26</sup> of cultural contents becomes a question of quantity, of magnitude; the world of the spirit changes to one of producers and consumers. On the one hand, Simmel suggests that the Marxian commodity fetishism is only a special case of "this general fate

<sup>24</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 40.

<sup>25</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 40.

<sup>26</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 42.

of contents of culture".<sup>27</sup> On the other, having reached a philosophical impasse, his argument relies more and more on the quantitative increase in cultural production. Now it is the change of subjects into consumers, and of creativity into industrial (re)production that worries him. In an era of extreme specialization and mass production, instead of contributing to it, cultural works turn people away from cultivation. It is this cultural predicament which, in its intensity, brings to the fore the tragedy of culture, the fact that the immanent force of the inner development of spiritual objects estranges them both from their origin (the soul) and from their purpose (cultivation). Humans have lost control over their creations.

Simmel's exploration of alienation proceeds with unbridled culturalism. Just as he transformed the Hegelian dialectic of the spirit earlier, he now transforms the Marxian dialectic of history into one of culture, and presents it as tragic, thus at the same time remaining faithful to the speculative roots of the dialectic, namely, the dialectical engagement with tragedy, more than a century earlier, in the work of the German Romantic artists, critics, and philosophers. There is, however, a major difference. This time, the problem is not the commercialization of the art market or the vulgarization of literary opinion that inspires this engagement. From Schiller to Marx, artistic creation was the model of non-alienated work, presenting the organic autonomy of the disinterested artistic sphere as an alternative to the modes of capitalist economy. Simmel is unwilling to grant culture such immunity. His view is deeply pessimistic. The fact that the modes of production have left behind the cultural super-structure is not just a "contradiction" but a manifestation of the basic "tragic paradox". Alienation does not inhere in labor alone but also in the area that was supposed to enlighten or redeem labor – in culture itself and the widening gap between subjective and objective culture. The contradictions of modern culture represent an intense dramatization of the constitutive conflict between life process and generated forms. Thus, what was earlier perceived as a historically specific phenomenon is elevated into the realm of an eternal tragedy of culture.

The choice of tragedy as the prototype of experiential alienation carries strong connotations. In a tragic situation, the destructive forces are immanent: the necessity of annihilation is the logical development of the very structure that has produced it. Just as the forces destroying the tragic heroes and heroines do not come from the outside but from within, their nature fulfilling their unique destiny (the fall of the auto-posed subjectivity), the destructive power of forms shares the same origin with the constructive one of creativity. What makes the human relationship to cultural objects tragic is that their human-made objectivity acquires an independent norm of development which tears them away from the subject, and the subject from itself (in a manner that repeats the scene of its original sin).

Modernity exacerbates the problem as it overwhelms all aspirations for cultivation with an infinite number of "producers", a boundless "supply" of

<sup>27</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2 ) 42.



objectified contents, and a "voracious capacity for accumulation".<sup>28</sup> This situation of generalized cultural economy baffles the moderns as they are thrown into total (tragic) relationships with elements they can neither ignore nor absorb, neither reject nor master. Such elements promise continuous cultivation but in the end contribute to a feeling of powerlessness and exhaustion. At the same time, the expanding technical skills of specialization aggravate the division of labor which separates work from life, and the product from its creators, emptying the subjects (as producers) of their cultural content while exposing them to an assault by indistinguishable, uncontrollable, mass-produced cultural objects, each one asserting its importance and clamoring for attention.

Simmel's critique of the commercialization of culture builds on a tradition of more than a century of aesthetic philosophy that scrutinized modern ills on the basis of the decline of taste and the emergence of a mass audience. What differentiates this critique from its predecessors is its culturalist diagnosis of alienation and its despair over the possibility of cultural emancipation. Simmel is the first critic to observe that the modern problem is not deficient or mediocre but excessive cultivation. Where the pursuit of *Bildung* until his time set individuals on a course of exploration, seeking ideas, values, and works that they could assimilate into their growth, the overpowering presence of culture everywhere in the modern world forces them in the opposite direction, one of avoiding culture in the name of cultivation. In order to protect its integrity, instead of anticipating an ultimate synthesis, cultivation must actively engage in irreconcilable opposition. Simmel is committed to *Bildung* as the cultivation of subjective potentialities through the utilization of objective contents. "Cultivation is, so to speak, the ethical aspect of *Lebensphilosophie*, for it means treating one's own life as an object that must be continuously shaped."<sup>29</sup> However, given the crisis of modern culture, cultivation of individual autonomy should abandon the ideal of assimilation, develop an aesthetic distance from the world, and adopt a counter-cultural stance. Simmel develops Hegel's dialectical conception of *Bildung* because he finds in it a connection between philosophy and social theory: the subject both constitutes socio-cultural milieu (through objectification) and is constituted by it (through assimilation of collective objectifications). Through the mediation of objective spirit, pure subjectivity is transformed into subjective spirit. Hegelian *Bildung* mediates between individuals and society. Following a socio-cultural reading of Hegel, though, Simmel sees all objectification as alienation, seeking its transcendence in the identity of soul and structure. Dreading the creation of permanent objects as well as objectification as self-creation, he never considers the possibility of an appropriation of objective reality by an embodied subject. That is why praxis is completely absent from his work.

The noble pursuit of culture, unavoidable as it is for human maturity, is ultimately self-defeating because no level of maturity can fully control it and prevent it from deteriorating into a self-reproducing indiscriminate pluralism.

<sup>28</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 44.

<sup>29</sup> Rudolph H. Weingartner, "Theory and Tragedy of Culture" [1960]. In Lewis A. Coser (ed.), *Georg Simmel* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1965) 127.

This insight confirms the innately tragic character of culture, whereby spirit is alienating itself through its own spiritual work. "One of the basic capacities of the spirit is to separate itself from itself – to create forms, ideas and values that oppose it, and only in this form to gain consciousness of itself. This capacity has reached its widest extent in the process of culture."<sup>30</sup> Modern cultural alienation drives the askesis of cultivation into paroxysm. Not just the character but the function of culture is now tragic. The only option left to cultivation is the negation of culture, a negative aesthetic, a suspended dialectic. Thus *Bildung* must become oppositional.

In a coda that prefigures the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture, Simmel laments the "adornment and overloading of our lives with a thousand superfluous items, from which, however, we cannot liberate ourselves; the continuous 'stimulation' of civilized man who in spite of all this is not stimulated to expressions of individual creativity".<sup>31</sup> He views these cultural ills as consequences of "the emancipation of the objectified spirit",<sup>32</sup> of its independence which leads it farther and farther away from its goal of cultivation. Form is emancipated but the soul cannot liberate itself. This is the tragic situation of culture that, instead of achieving a synthesis, carries its self-destructive fate within it from the beginning. Culture as a means undermines culture as a goal. Overcoming develops its own duality and turns against itself. It is this dialectical elaboration and abnegation that Horkheimer and Adorno popularized later with their "tragic"<sup>33</sup> interdependence of myth and reason in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is also the same elaboration that inspired Lukács to posit, as the last Left Hegelian quest for reconciliation, the concept of "totality". In both cases, Simmel's epitaph for culture has been interpreted as the birth certificate of oppositional *Bildung*, of cultivation as counter-politics. This legacy is still central to all post-structuralist theory, from deconstruction to gender and post-colonial studies.

At the very end of his essay, Simmel returns to the fundamental question of the autonomy of the spirit: "The great enterprise of the spirit succeeds innumerable times in overcoming the object as such by making an object of itself, returning to itself enriched by its creation. But the spirit has to pay for this self-perfection with the tragic potential that a logic and dynamic is inevitably created by the unique laws of its own world which increasingly separates the contents of culture from its essential meaning and value."<sup>34</sup> The tragedy of the autonomous spirit is its success, its making a perfect object of itself – a new world with its unique laws. By doing so, it seems to violate a commandment against such independent creativity. The path of the soul toward perfection passes through beautiful cities of idols, the world of forms. Once it begins traversing this worldly domain, it is led astray and cannot find its way back to itself, it cannot regain its self-enclosed,

<sup>30</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 45.

<sup>31</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 46.

<sup>32</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 46.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment: Athenian Political Thought and the Dilemmas of Modernity* (Berkeley 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 2) 46.

pre-self identity. The theater of appearances (that is, the contents of culture) lures it away from its tautological essence into a quest for self-determination. The song of the Sirens puts on it the spell of other melodies and meanings. The soul is condemned to an unfulfilled motion of exile from its homeland, the spirit. Its heteronomy results in the negativity of culture. The tragedy of the spirit (whose cultural expedition is but one, though obviously the most representative, manifestation of the cyclical motion that drives it first toward objects and then back to its orbit) is its internal division, its subsequent twin fall into self and signification, into soul and form. The price the spirit pays for its self-perfection is the loss of its authentic identity.

The image of the cyclical motion of the spirit which is driven, first into adventures with forms, and then back to its alienated self, is based on an allegorical use of Odysseus' travels and return to Ithaca. Throughout the twentieth century, the Homeric story has retained its status as a paradigmatic quest of identity – one thinks, for example, of explorations by Lukács and Auerbach in literary theory, Joyce and Kafka in fiction, Kazantzakis and Walcott in poetry, Godard and Angelopoulos in film, Skalkotas and Berio in music. Following Simmel's lament for the successful but dishonored return, Levinas draws explicitly on the same allegory to attack the nostalgia for home as the circular adventure of Western metaphysics from Parmenides to Heidegger – the search for truth, Being, and self, or Novalis's definition of philosophy as homesickness. "Philosophy has long aspired to the totality of homeliness, the ideal of at-homeness (*Heimatlichkeit*) in one's entire existence, and has found its model in the Greek (self)representation. ... Being-at-home-with-oneself means to be the ground and origin of oneself, to arise from out of oneself and be in possession of one's life. Independent existence has its own self-justifying value: this is the lesson modern man should learn from antiquity."<sup>35</sup> Home is where worldly dwelling takes place, and it can cover a wide range of experiences, from self to art. In Odysseus' adventures, Levinas (1968) sees an itinerary of return, "a complacency of the Same".<sup>36</sup> Self-realization and self-knowledge are not legitimate goals because they amount to man turning himself into god. That is why Levinas calls philosophy, the Western itinerary to these destinations, "the temptation of temptations".

Simmel's fear of the domination of objective culture, of the "culture of things" over humans, reappears intensified in Levinas's discussion of "things". Things are important insofar as they constitute the human world, providing enjoyment and an appreciation of this life's pleasures. While they are naked, without any identity, the necessary involvement with them can lead to the Face, which is the ultimate nudity. Levinas's view of the Face is a Talmudic gloss on Paul's famous passage: "For now we know in part and we prophecy in part; but when the perfect comes, that which is partial shall pass away. ... For we now look through a mirror in an enigma but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I

<sup>35</sup> Vassilis Lambropoulos, *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation* (Princeton 1993) 215–216.

<sup>36</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "On the Trail of the Other". Trans. Daniel J. Hoy. *Philosophy Today* 10 (1968) 34–45.

shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (*I Corinthians* 13.9–12). Humans live in a world of reflections and shadows, and they know only in part. Only when the perfect, the eschaton, comes, will they be able to look not at the mirror of their own creations but at the Face itself, and be seen by it as well. However, humans often forget that things are only "playthings", mere shadows, and therefore cannot lead to transcendence. The true transcendental experience is beyond form. The face of the Other is nudity from form. Since he is free from any formal constraints, the Other cannot be represented, only encountered in a face-to-face experience. The danger arises when such things acquire an identity, a false one, by being endowed with beauty. When things acquire beauty, their being is doubled in form and their essential nakedness is obscured by identity. By giving them autonomy and individuality, beauty draws objects into a different sphere, the domain of aesthetic finality. Under these conditions, their shadows promise an alternative totality, making humans idealize the self-sufficient image as infinity and mistake enjoyment for transcendence. But because it doubles the being of things in self-sufficient form, beauty, through its aesthetic orientation, can lead astray those who seek the absolute in the path from form to nudity, from thing to Face. Levinas uses the figure of Odysseus to portray this loss of direction and entrapment in a world of beautiful forms.

Levinas frets about objective representation because he does not believe in self-justifying values and shudders at independent existence that is in possession of one's life. To him, autonomy means atheism, and immanence equals idolatry. Accordingly, he entertains a fierce antipathy toward art. In *Totality and Infinity*, he presents art as a derivative domain of a secondary nature that imprisons its followers in a world of shadowy appearances, and he treats it as a wicked, blasphemous, and dangerous practice. Because of its Circean power to mislead people away from the course to transcendence, art is an invitation to a monstrous, inhuman world. In the finality of art, the totality of beauty, and in general in all formed representation, Levinas sees the enemies of the naked and infinite Face, the face of obligation – the commanding face of faith.

To follow the path that led from Simmel's fear of form to Levinas's censure of representation to Derrida's critique of presence to contemporary rejections of pictoriality is to trace the engagement of modern thought on many fronts with the dilemma that Gombrich called "assimilation or imitation". One front is obviously the anxiety over the eminence and priority of the Ancients. Another concerns the iconomachic legacy of the Reformation against any embodiment of the spirit. A third one is the challenge stemming from Nietzsche's ethical attack on decadence and resentment. Closer to our concerns here would be the "luciferian" (Lukács) view of art shared by early Modernism. Simmel, his students, and his descendants from Thomas Mann to Celan struck a reverse Faustian pact with aesthetic cultivation: they renounced mimesis and gave up the world through (rather than for) art in order to reach salvation of the soul, dedicating themselves to the Antichrist, at it were, in order to provoke God's intervention.

But can there be a non-cultural cultivation? A number of non-Protestant writers (Rosenzweig, Ortega, Berdyaev, Maritain, Simone Weil, Levinas) could

not allow cultivation to become the shaping of life itself. If, as Simmel argued, the tragedy of the spirit is its internal division, then the spirit should not pursue in vain self-perfection and its adventures in the Cyclopean caves of forms or the seas of the Sirens. Levinas suggested that its destination should be separation, not identity: nomadic wandering, not return. There is no Ithaca to which Odysseus could return. If totalization is impossible, if subject and object cannot be reconciled, if perfection destroys authenticity, then true relation is only possible as separation. The deception of a perfection achieved in the aesthetic realm should be renounced. Instead, division ought to be embraced as the true course to individuation. Individuation uproots the self from being and separates it from manifestation, setting it free to develop a relation with the Other by responding to his command and serving the infinity of his transcendence. Perfection is aesthetic, severance is ethical. Thus, Levinas would conclude, tragedy does not pertain to the spirit since, far from being a contradiction, division is the fundamental operation of the spirit's nature which opens the possibility of transcendence. Tragedy pertains to culture only because it is the outcome of the spirit's seduction by form, its loss of infinite direction, and its fall into self-perfection. "A sense of names 'archaically' conjoined to things belongs to tragedy, while the Judeo-Christian God imposes a difference between names and things as his law. He orders man never to make a tragedy of himself, for he has reserved heaven and hell for him alone."<sup>37</sup>

A generation older than Levinas, Simmel did not live to see his ideas turn into monophysitic dogma. His essay, though, is the most concise statement of *Kulturphilosophie*, a landmark in the theoretical turn that made culture, rather than history, society, or economy, the privileged domain of the spirit. The aesthetic turn in philosophy, criticism, education, history and so on was of course nothing new at that time. Since the early nineteenth century, it represented a programmatic, vital alternative to, or refuge from all modern evil and corruption – secularism, materialism, commercialism, consumerism, anomie, normalization, modernization, and the like. Idealism had charged individuals with constructing a purely human personal life through the devoted and systematic pursuit of an aesthetic education. What was new in Simmel's time was the deployment of culture as a negative (rather than simply an alternative) force – as not just a comportment but an energy of such vitality and creativity that it alone could resist the pervasiveness of alienation. Thus *Kultur* was combined indissolubly with *Kritik*.

Following the devastating critique of liberalism from several philosophical and scholarly sides at the end of the century, the positive, collective, and pedagogical Romantic ideal of *Bildung* as organic, autonomous cultivation of *Innerlichkeit* had lost its credibility. Pessimism over the commodification of bourgeois culture increased as liberal individuals of the professional and commercial bourgeoisie, with their strong interests in profit, leisure, and popular fiction, did not

<sup>37</sup> Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*. Trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New Haven 1993 [1973–1981]) 33–34.

grow into what Shaftesbury or Humboldt had originally envisioned. Neither their morals nor their taste could be trusted to resist the preferences of an open market and the procedures of a tolerant parliament. Their conservative judgment and conformist conduct (Nietzsche's *Bildungs-Philistertum*) seemed to ridicule earlier hopes that cultivation of individuality would free the natural person from social and moral conventions.

Despite all these disappointing developments, the project of cultivation as the aesthetic assimilation of modernity was not altogether abandoned. Its ascetic task of a continuous shaping of individual life, and of consistent maturity toward self-perfection on the basis of an intrinsic norm, was recuperated by the vitalism of cultural "experience" (and, more recently, cultural identity) and its interpretive regimen. While static principles of harmony, unity, and reason were discarded, they were replaced by dynamic principles of life,<sup>38</sup> force, and flux. In this context, the late eighteenth century attack on the Enlightenment ideal of civilization as universal history, secular development, and linear progress acquired critical power and oppositional potency.<sup>39</sup>

Herder, the initiator of that attack, had pluralized "culture", writing about specific and diverse cultures of different nations, periods, and socio-economic communities. Thus from the very beginning *Kultur* was based on difference and developed tremendous potential for collective othering as well as resistance. This new culture represented everything local, organic, and unique in contradistinction to the universal, material and mechanistic character of Enlightened modernity. Furthermore, instead of competing with the so-called Manchester capitalism on its own terms, it forged its own system of values and spheres of production, sharply differentiating spiritual, artistic, and intellectual creations from secular, industrial, and material products – a distinction that remained important from Kant to Marcuse. *Kultur* was an expressive concept based on identity and particularity that included unique works of collective human communication and self-definition like ideas, books, elements of faith, practices of creativity, and rites of interpretation – all of them specialties of the middle-class intellectuals (scholars, scientists, artists, essayists, teachers, journalists) who presented their objects of study and theory as supreme manifestations of the human spirit. These connoisseurs of debate elaborated on the three realms of intellectual self-formation – depth, spirit, and individuality. They also established the "public sphere", an alternative domain of literature, philosophy, theology, research, review, and performance, taking great pride in their accomplishments and proclaiming the birth of a cultural (as opposed to civic) democracy.

During Simmel's time, engagement with *Kultur* became *Kulturkritik* – an intellectual response to the crisis of the times not through political or ethical philosophy but through cultural opposition. Such strong emphasis on culture reflected a combination of social discontent, a sense of intellectual poverty, the decay of artistic individualism, and the triumph of bourgeois mediocrity. When

<sup>38</sup> Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From the Romantics to Hitler* (New York 1941) 16–47.

<sup>39</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford 1994 [1939]) 1=28

the intellectuals felt that the middle class had betrayed the social contract of *Bildung* by abandoning its spiritual responsibilities for the pleasures of popular taste and morality, they barricaded themselves within *Lebensformen* like the *Bund* and the *Gruppe*, turning the public sphere from an alternative democracy to a militant aristocracy<sup>40</sup> and declaring "war against the West"<sup>41</sup> – a civil war they fought and continue to fight using the sheer negative force of culture. Since they saw progress as spiritual decline, and politics as moral failure, they were determined to resist cultural disintegration, political anarchy, and social anomie by investing in art not for art's sake but as the only meaningful way of life – as pleromatic "experience".

Driven by spiritual views of history, they replaced the demonic of the Romantics with chiliastic visions (Heidegger's adventism, Benjamin's messianism, Lukács's totality, Bloch's "not yet") which prefigured spiritual, religious, aesthetic, and national redemption. In the simultaneous critiques of several grand systems (from parliamentarianism to Wagnerism, from Neo-Kantianism to capitalism), synthesis was rejected as totalitarian, being was presented as absolutist, while the unmitigated élan of becoming emerged as an open-ended goal. The new philosophy of heroic vitalism, revolutionary despair, and conservative nostalgia would not offer the vision of a reconciled civilization in repose but would call to arms the defenders of an embattled *Kultur*. In other words, it was time for cultures to either decay or clash. This well-documented path from aesthetic discontent to political pessimism to nihilist activism led to the first creation of cultural politics – an allegorical politics not of governance, morality, truth, or beauty but of expressive, injured, and embattled native authenticity.

Given its emphasis on authenticity, the political deployment of aesthetic culture as a contrarian force of critical vitality defending lived experience and resisting alienation faced from its inception the cardinal question of the relation between life and form. If the cultural production of the modern industry coopted and assimilated the humanistic project of collective culture, rendering works, practices, and norms impossible to absorb and organize, what would be the dissentient forms that could legitimately and creatively mediate the growth of the so it? What would be the properly dynamic and fluid forms of an authentic individual life in constant flux? As the very beginning of the Simmel essay makes clear, *Kulturphilosophie* cannot attend to its tasks before answering these questions. The demand for synthesis, which bourgeois culture failed to address, was now transferred to the realm of aesthetic individualism under conditions of market materialism and Philistinism. In this refined realm, nothing is valued more than the intensity of individual experience that reveals life in all its richness. Yet this illuminating experience is either one of those espoused by Sorel, Jünger, and Celine (one that can be lived, not known) or an epiphany of incarnation, of life's embodiment in form. The latter can turn the quest for full life into a plea for complete forms, for structures that can be known but not lived. In the

<sup>40</sup> Walter Struve, *Elites against Democracy: Leadership Ideals in Bourgeois Political Thought in Germany, 1890–1933* (Princeton 1973).

<sup>41</sup> Aurel Kolnai, *The War against the West* (London 1938).

end, Simmel concludes that the contradiction between life and form is so deeply embedded in the soul that it cannot be overcome. A transmutation of formed life into a lived form is existentially impossible. Culture cannot deliver the soul's unfolded multiplicity to the promised land of an unfolded unity. Thus, in the name of lived experience, cultivation declares a holy war on form.

Simmel describes this revolt of experience against form in a later essay, "The Conflict in Modern Culture" (1918), one of his last writings. There he argues that, while most eras witness a struggle between forms (new and dynamic vs. old and depleted), the modern world is experiencing an assault of life against form as such.<sup>42</sup> This rare assault is possible when cultural forms of all kinds are perceived as exhausted and life agitates against being confined to their fixed structures.<sup>43</sup> However, having set the stage for yet another *Trauerspiel* on culture, Simmel follows his favorite critical approach and decides to elaborate on a related topic. Instead of explaining the atrophy of modern forms and the reasons that have led to this crisis, instead of describing the death of form, he deviates to the emergence of the concept of "life" in the late 19th century. Because modern culture is devoid of ideals and is driven by a negative impulse, he writes, the question of the meaning and value of life as such has taken absolute priority.<sup>44</sup> The idea that the perfection of a closed system is a valid criterion of truth<sup>45</sup> is rejected. The formal principle which presented structures as beings with their own meaning and power is discarded. The new principle is life itself which no longer listens or reports to outside authorities. Instead of allowing itself to be absorbed into other systems, this new life will assimilate everything into its own. Now everything must be transformed into life.<sup>46</sup>

But there is more to life's declaration of independence than we first hear. Simmel reveals that the revolt is directed not just against the exhaustion of culture (since, after all, such a revolt would be led by new forms, rather than life) but against all forms, old and new. The principle of form has a specific name, materiality, and configuration: form is the classical molding of being into plastic formations which fuse life with art completely.<sup>47</sup> Classicism is "the ideology of form",<sup>48</sup> the confidence and trust in its meaning and power. Thus, though prompted by a pervasive sense of exhaustion, the revolt of life is not directed against form as such but against the classical understanding of form and its belief in the possibility of a life-art fusion. Now that life feels self-assured,<sup>49</sup> it strives from within to liberate itself from form – by contradicting and destroying it – and to preserve a self-conscious expression of itself.

<sup>42</sup> Simmel, "The Conflict in Modern Culture" in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*. Trans. K. Peter Eitzkorn (New York 1968) 12.

<sup>43</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 13.

<sup>44</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 15.

<sup>45</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 21.

<sup>46</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 20.

<sup>47</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 17.

<sup>48</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 21.

<sup>49</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 21–22.



We thus discover that modern life is fighting against neither depleted nor old forms but only against a certain "ideology of form", the one which promised a reconciliation between life and art, experience and representation. All the earlier negative remarks about closed systems and their suffocating perfection apply only to the classical ideal. In proclaiming its self-assurance, life is affirming the bankruptcy of that ideal. Life can rebel against the formal principle but cannot exist without form. At the end of his career, and with the serene combination of bitterness and dignity that characterizes his later writings, Simmel acknowledges that the predicament of cultural life, its inherent basic conflict, cannot be overcome. The drive toward forms, the ineluctable necessity of forms whose very being contradicts the essence of life, persists. "Life is inseparably charged with contradiction. It can enter reality only in the form of its antithesis, that is, only in the form of form."<sup>50</sup> There is no other form but form. At the same time, life, feeling that structures inhibit its energy, "desires to transcend all forms and to appear in its naked immediacy".<sup>51</sup> This was Levinas' starting position that led him to the transcendent encounter with the naked Face. But Simmel recognizes that an escape into the infinite is not available either: "Yet the processes of thinking, wishing, and forming can only substitute one form for another. They can never replace the form as such by life which as such transcends the form. All these attacks against the forms of our culture, which align against them the forces of life 'in itself', embody the deepest internal contradictions of the spirit".<sup>52</sup> This was Derrida's riposte to Levinas which produced deconstruction. Even though life may be agitating against the ideology of the fixed form, rejecting the ideal of its fusion with, and therefore absorption into, art, there is no surpassing the classical drive. Simmel concludes by suggesting reconciliation with the tragic fate of culture: "The bridge between the past and the future of cultural forms seems to be demolished; we gaze into an abyss of unformed life beneath our feet. But perhaps this formlessness is itself the appropriate form for contemporary life. Thus the blueprint of life is obliquely fulfilled."<sup>53</sup> So long as life continues to be a struggle, it should be content because its destiny is fulfilled. The peace of a reconciliation between life and form "remains an eternal (*göttlich*) secret to us".<sup>54</sup> Only in God can the opposites be reconciled, as Simmel had argued a few years before: "The essence of the notion of God is that all diversities and contradictions in the world achieve a unity in him, that he is – according to a beautiful formulation of Nicolas de Cusa – the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Out of this idea, that in him all estrangements and all irreconcilables find their unity and equalization, there arises the peace, the security, the all-embracing wealth of feeling that reverberate with the notion of God which we hold."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

<sup>51</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

<sup>52</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

<sup>53</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

<sup>54</sup> Simmel (*supra* n. 42) 25.

<sup>55</sup> Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*. Trans. David Frisby and Tom Bottomore (London 1990 [1900]) 236.

Simmel's remarks enable us to explore the emergence of form as a problematical idea in modern thought. At first glance, it seems paradoxical for a study of "life" to focus so intensely and so passionately on form. When life is posited as an independent entity and a self-sustained value, we would expect to learn more about its richness, its variety, its strength, and its superiority over any other system. But this kind of life appears to have little at its disposal besides its wealth of experiences. By itself, it is self-centered and self-consuming, dumb and silent before a world of overwhelming abundance and complexity. In fact, the more it becomes more-than-life, the less worldly it appears. Unless it chooses to withdraw into mysticism, it needs a kind of profane engagement that will give it purpose and movement. Thus the definition of life as soul and as experience requires the parallel creation of "form" as a concept of worldliness, of appearance, and of enunciation. This form is a protocol of worship. It is a means by which the spirit adorns and praises its elusive essence, making it visible and accessible to all. Correspondingly, cultivation is the rite of passage that initiates individuals into the mysteries of the spirit, its inner separation and harmonization. The cultivated person is involved in spiritual exercises that constitute the domain of culture and confer to life its worldly worth. But the commerce between culture and the soul raises the question of incarnation: What is the appropriate form that the spirit must take in order to appear in the world? How can life be objectified without falling prey to beautiful idols and beginning to worship itself?

What Simmel called the "classical" answer to this puzzle, with its pneumatic faith in reconciliation, envisioned a fusion of life with art. Modern views, which have rejected that Idealist faith and have rebelled against the plastic principle of representation, need a different response that will keep the objectification available without abolishing the dialectical tension. Following the repudiation of classical ideology, the dilemma between imitation and assimilation does not hold. The solution cannot come from inquiries that are still defined by theories of presentation, figuration, or pictoriality. Neither rhetoric nor poetics can conceptualize this issue, which goes to the spiritual heart of form itself. The question of form is not open to mere artistic or philosophical deliberation any more. It has acquired a moral urgency that can be addressed only by the metaphysics of culture. The demand is not for a beautiful or even pure form but for a righteous one. Culture stands accused of artness and must find a new rectitude. The moment of this stark realization marks the impasse of dialectics, the inability of the conceptual means at one's disposal to provide an insight and a passage beyond the intransigent laws of experience and do justice to its boundless authenticity. It is at this most difficult moment that Simmel introduces the idea of the tragic to capture the self-confuting essence of the spirit, its constitutive negativity. The failed revolt against the classical understanding of form is thus expressed through a classical idea.

This is also the moment in which modern thought discovers in the spirit's negativity the answer to its spiritual quest in the Mediterranean seas of culture. The only moral form, the only form that can honestly deal with the contradiction between life and form, is the form that remains form and refuses to become

anything else. The unrepresentable is the sacred. The transmutation of formed life into a lived form would be idolatry and has been forbidden. "The heroic and tragic undertaking of the great Impressionists consists precisely of this: unable to escape form – the only possible medium of their essential existence – they always demand of it and impose on it something which contradicts its meaning, which annuls form. For, if form ceases to be self-contained, sovereign and complete in itself, it ceases to be form. There can be no form which serves and is open to life."<sup>56</sup> In order to compensate for the heteronomy of life, for the fact that life without objectification is less-than-life, form must become more-than-form, a grammatological form, a force of grammatical (for example, analytic, futuristic, cubist, twelve-tone) invention that cannot be assimilated or appropriated. Rejecting with contempt the commercial success of low art among the educated classes, it must abandon content, as Clement Greenberg proclaimed,<sup>57</sup> and turn to avant-garde formalism. It must resist the commodification of culture by remaining stubbornly alienating. It will thematize its dialectical necessity and insist on the necessary failure of that dialectic. And it will keep *Bildung* oppositional by infinitely extending the cyclical motion of the soul, never allowing it to return to its homeland and instead pushing it to renewed adventures in the diaspora of objectification. The restless life of the creative soul will know no rest, organic process will achieve no permanence, the spirit will reach no communion. Exiled from the primordial domain of cratylism, language will honor the memory of tautology by endlessly dividing and multiplying itself. The aporetic view of language crystallizes the apophatic understanding of the spirit. Like the God of the Christian Neo-Platonists, the spirit of the culturalists can only be known by what it is not – by following the *via negativa* of denying cataphatic attributes to it. Condemned to autonomy, the spirit will resist the mimetic temptations of cultural independence by observing the ban on representation and welcoming the Babelization of tongues.

This is the minima moralia of counter-cultural politics. In this stern moral system, ethics undergoes an extensive vitalization in that life is understood in terms of process and force. It also undergoes an individualization in that life is understood in terms of experience and resistance. The new morality of aesthetic self-cultivation curtails responsibility to the preservation of inner freedom; it reduces ethics to Simmel's "individual law"; and it limits cultivation to the negation of culture. But what this scheme sacrifices in moralia, it more than gains in aesthetica, as anti-cultural cultivation recuperates several theological issues gradually abandoned by philosophy during the nineteenth century, such as tradition, grace, presence, incarnation, faith, and the absence of God. In the dispossessed, self-exiled, catastrophic dwelling of minima moralia, maxima aesthetica succeeds theology as the inquiry into transcendence, an ascetic inquiry of great devotion and diffidence which takes over the rituals of consecration and prosely-

<sup>56</sup>Georg Lukács, "Georg Simmel". Trans. Margaret Cerullo. *Theory, Culture & Society* 8:3 (1991 [1918]) 146.

<sup>57</sup>Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" [1939]. In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston 1961).

tization. To those unable to participate in communion or commit themselves to mysticism, the ethical exercises of the aesthetic cultivation intimate, in the midst of the tragedy of culture, a modernist (and later post-modernist) sublime: the chiliastic restitution of ruined lives, damaged works, incomplete essays, undermined arguments, and wrecked systems – the apokatastasis of disfigured representations in the redemption of form.

The uses of tragedy by the transcendental aesthetics of oppositional cultivation appear at first rather superfluous. With its pagan origins, profane concerns, dramatic presence, and theomachic heroes, the genre of tragedy would appear ill-suited for metaphysical critiques of alienation. It is true, as we saw earlier, that it serves as a prototype of the immanent destructive forces of objectification, the self-blinding insights of creativity into the riddles of existence. Tragedy is not exile from Paradise but the irrepressible human drive toward forbidden knowledge. This is how Simmel defined it in his posthumous diary: "The apple from the tree of knowledge was unripe." The crime was not even worth it! The ripe knowledge, the knowledge that would turn man into god, has been forfeited by man's own impetuous questioning. "Here everything depends on how the accent is applied: It is not the Fall from Paradise, the forfeiting of freedom from death, or the quarrel with the benevolent master of the garden that distresses the late thinker, but rather the vexation caused by the fact, which is paradigmatic for all ages of mankind to come, that the fruit had been taken from the tree of knowledge a little bit too soon, too hastily, and thus the only compensation for the loss of Paradise has been forfeited."<sup>58</sup>

But together with the allegorical depiction of the necessary annihilation of the divided spirit, tragedy is also called to express the heroic defiance of the "paradox of culture" by oppositional cultivation – the melancholic predicament of an aesthetic faith condemned to wander among deserted temples that became beautiful ruins, communal rites that turned into civic theater, sacred books that are taught as literature, divine apparitions that are venerated as icons. Simmel and his epigones believed that, with its independent structures and "autopoietic systems" (Luhmann), modern culture stood opposed to human potentialities and development. Thus they saw the spirit trapped between Apollonian forces of power and form, on the one hand, and Dionysian force of freedom and experience, on the other. Given the conflict of these irreconcilable forces, tragedy came to signify the suspension of culture between (modern) life and (classical) creation. If this tension could not be resolved, the only ethical decision that made itself available was the refusal to make a choice between the two forces and the determination to keep their conflict alive and urgent. While Weber had proposed a distinction between an "ethics of conviction" and an "ethics of responsibility", beginning with Simmel, cultural philosophy opted for its own ethics of ferocious non-conviction, specifically, of formalist critique and aesthetic resistance.

The uses of tragedy here have strong moral connotations in that they are meant to depict the trials of faith among radiant, autonomous, permanent struc-

<sup>58</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*. Trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA 1985 [1979]).

tures while the promise of transcendence is constantly deferred. In the "epoch of absolute sinfulness" (Fichte), the tragic hero is "a volitional and spiritual being"<sup>59</sup> – he is the individual of cultivation (Stephen Dedalus, Adrian Leverkühn, Jean-Christophe Krafft) who endures with dignity the paradox of aesthetic faith (its antinomical dependence on the being of forms) and survives the crisis of modern culture with his adventist hope intact. Comparing ancient and modern tragedy in terms of their depiction of time, Spengler notes: "The sentiment of the ahistorical soul gives us a Classical tragedy of the moment, and that of the ultrahistorical soul puts before us Western tragedy that deals with the *development of a whole life*. Our tragedy arises from the feeling of an *inexorable* Logic of becoming",<sup>60</sup> and it is this unavoidable course of becoming that the tragic idea presupposes. By transforming the *Geisteswissenschaften* into a cultural philosophy of objectification, and by dramatizing *Lebensphilosophie* in tragic terms, Simmel made possible the creation of *Kulturkritik* as the minima moralia of aesthetic resistance – a militant hermeneutics deployed by alienated virtuosos of cultivation against a hostile and unjust world.

Recent considerations of culture have uniformly drawn on the Self-Other dialectic, discussing the "invention" of this social, political, national, or ethnic domain in connection with its inescapable reliance on the invention of other such domains against which culture needs to be posited and positioned. Although constructionist approaches of this kind may be useful in an ethnographic context that is (national or international) policy oriented, they obscure the relevant philosophical issues in that they still follow the dialectical logic of "culture", and therefore remain culturalist themselves. Since the late eighteenth century, the languages of culturalism have always included an extensive vocabulary of difference and otherness, which has served eloquently their separatist aspirations. In fact, the "othering" qualities of culture have been so popular and effective that they have been avidly reproduced everywhere. But the concept of culture is not based on difference or sameness. This is what it claims but this is not how it operates. Culture demands, rather than denies, the existence of other cultures.

A proper understanding of modern "culture" requires an investigation of its emergence during the iconoclastic battles of the turn of the twentieth century, when, in works like Simmel's, *Kultur* divided into life and structure, a self-differentiation from which it has not recovered yet. "With the problem put in the in the terms of life-form, there can only be one task or commitment to be fulfilled: that of reestablishing the forms of life – a task proper to *Philosophie als Kultur*."<sup>61</sup> Since that time, since humanist *Bildung* collapsed and aesthetics began losing faith in its Hegelian incarnationist legacy, the basis of this concept is the paradox of culture, the fact that, as Simmel described it, its question is mournfully lodged in the middle of the soul-form dualism. Because this metaphysical dualism is perceived as the source of "innumerable tragedies", the mediation of culture is

<sup>59</sup>Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley 1961) 278.

<sup>60</sup>Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York 1926 [1918]) 130.

<sup>61</sup>Cacciari (*supra* n. 37) 68.

sought in order to provide reconciliation. But instead of achieving synthesis, culture turns into a paradox by producing a new estrangement – the alienation of spiritual objects from the soul and its desired cultivation. If beauty doubles the form of things into identities, culture doubles these identities into spiritual objects. Instead of effecting fusion, culture produces a play of opposite mirrors. The apple of knowledge is unripe because, by doubling beauty into autonomous perfection, culture never ripens into cultivation.

This self-inhibiting growth makes the paradox of culture a tragic one. The fate of culture is similar to that of Oedipus whose riddle-solving intelligence was so estranged from his own life. Because it is based on an internal separation that endlessly reproduces itself in the form of a tormented division, culture is innately tragic and exists in a permanent state of fear, doubt, and indecision. As a result, it is constantly engaged in rituals of self-mutilation, self-denial, and self-hatred – accused, for example, of delusion by Freud or of barbarism by Benjamin. Nowhere has this pathos been expressed more fervently than in Adorno's denunciation: "All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage. ... Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be. Not even silence gets us out of the circle."<sup>62</sup> After Simmel, the cyclical movement of the spirit toward and away from the objects of culture, set in motion by the exterminating spell of forms, cannot be avoided. After Simmel, culture, including its urgent critique, is declared guilty. The philosophy of culture, including warnings against it like Adorno's, is a tragic enterprise.

At the same time, this philosophy has elevated its belief in an inescapable complicity to an ethics of unwordliness, as its practices of oppositional cultivation faithfully keep devising internal separations and multiplying cultural identities so that culture can be kept in a state of ever-intensifying crisis. Because of its engagement with tragedy, modern culture has sometimes considered the question of hubris, of its own legitimacy and limits. In the same section of *Negative Dialectics*, "Metaphysics and Culture", Adorno expressed some apprehension about a "tragic posture"<sup>63</sup>: "The theology of the crisis registered the fact it was abstractly and therefore idly rebelling against: that metaphysics has merged with culture".<sup>64</sup> Yet, before the end of his paragraph, he reverted to translating this warning into his obsessive concern with words and the wrath of God. Metaphysics thwarts any attempt to confront the political hubris of *Kulturkritik*. So long as human creativity feels intimidated by divine prohibitions, it will remain a sole, alienated, melancholic protagonist on the tragic stage of culture, conjuring up an aesthetic politics of identity to redeem his sinful drive toward forbidden knowledge, namely, toward his classical disposition.

<sup>62</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton (New York 1973 [1966]) 367.

<sup>63</sup> Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr., *Tragic Posture and Tragic Vision. Against the Modern Failure of Nerve* (New York 1994).

<sup>64</sup> Adorno (*supra* n. 62) 367.

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